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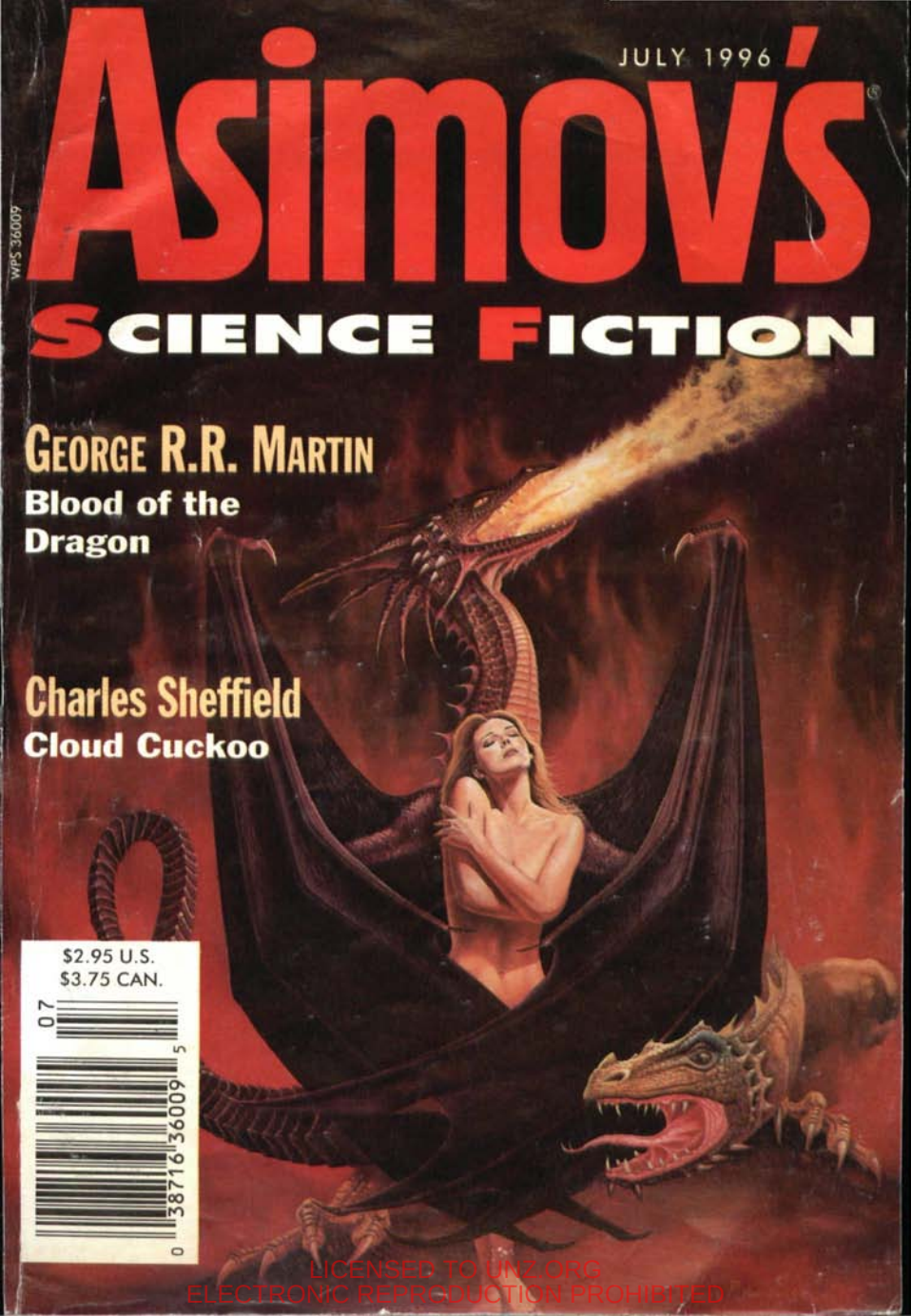

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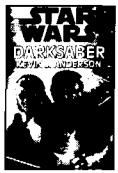

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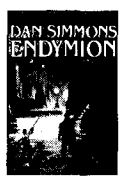

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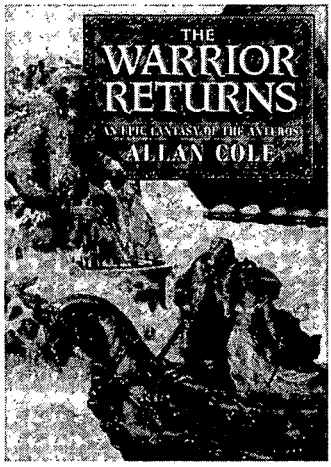

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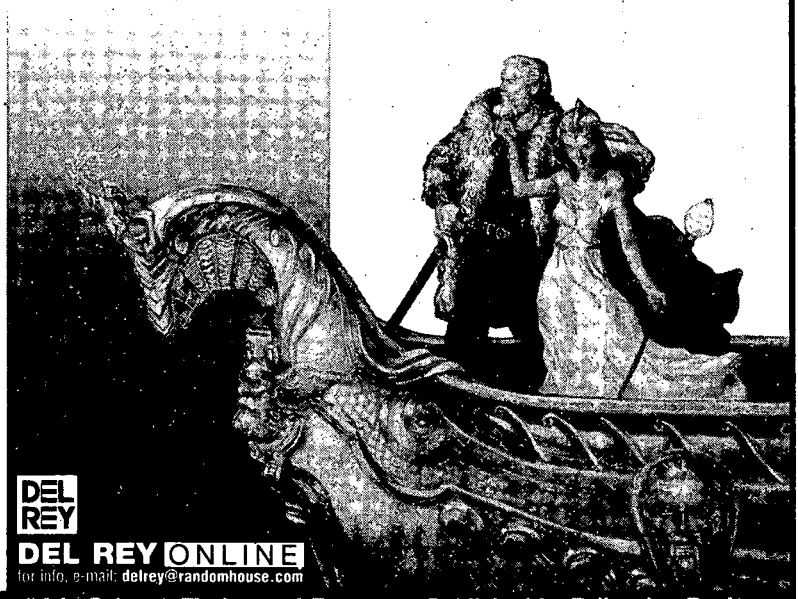

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

I had my first demonstration of European linguistic virtuosity in 1960, at a restaurant on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, where the head waiter greeted each guest in that guest's language. Usually he could guess the right language to use before the new guests had even spoken—from the cut of their clothes, I suppose, or haircut style, or the shape of their noses. I was one of his rare mistakes: he hailed me in French, perhaps because even in 1960 I wore a neat little goatee, and that must have looked French to him. (Beards were so rare on Americans in 1960 that children would turn to stare at me in the streets. That changed a few years later.)

I watched in awe as he moved from table to table, exchanging a bit of Italian with one set of diners, Spanish with another, German with a third, Portuguese (perhaps) with a fourth, and English (after I had admitted the truth) with me, while continuing all the while to issue instructions in French to the rest of the restaurant's staff. Coming as I did from the resolutely monolingual United States, I was deeply impressed.

I can make myself understood pretty well in Italian, can conduct basic tourist transactions and inquiries in Spanish and French, can manage a few dozen words of German, all of which puts me ahead of most Americans abroad; but I don't regard myself as fluent in any of those languages. Wherever I go, and I've been to a lot of places, I try to learn at least how to say "please" and "thank you" and "where is the toilet?" and in Turkey last year Karen and I got very good at explaining in pidgin Turkish that our car had a flat tire; but basically I conduct myself in English wherever I go, supplementing it where appropriate with Italian or a bit of Spanish or French, and generally I am understood. English is the language of Earth. In our tales of the future, we science fiction guys often tend to have Earthmen speaking something called "Terran," but the election has been held, the results are in, and "Terran" is in fact going to be English. Forget about Esperanto.

It's already happened. I don't mean simply that hotel clerks and taxi drivers have learned English in order to be able to communicate with obstinately monolingual tourists from the United States. I mean that people of various nations and languages are using English to communicate *with each other*, because it's the only language they have in common.

In the Scandinavian countries,

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English long ago became mandatory for elementary-school instruction, and most people in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark speak it with great ease. The same is true in the Netherlands. A logical move: these are small European countries that speak obscure languages that few foreigners care to master, and if they are going to communicate easily with the other countries with whom they do business (and they are all active mercantile nations) it's a good idea to master an internationally useful tongue.

So English has become the language in which the Dutch speak to Russians and Norwegians talk to Greeks. The efficiency of knowing English has become apparent in recent years even to the speakers of less esoteric European languages—German, Italian, even French, which English has displaced as the international means of communication, just as French had displaced Latin. Everywhere, nowadays, you will find people who have nothing in common linguistically except a knowledge of English talking to one another in that language.

Aboard a ferry traveling in the Greek islands ten years ago, for example, I listened with fascination as a little group of young Swedish, French, and German travelers who had just met aboard the boat carried on an animated conversation in variously accented English. A couple of years ago in a Prague restaurant I overheard a Czech businessman discussing a real-estate transaction with a Turk—in English, of course. Again and

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again in Spain, Italy, and Turkey I have seen local tour guides delivering English-language lectures on archaeology or art to groups of Japanese tourists; since the tour leaders all know English already, and most Japanese do also, it has not proven necessary for the guides to bother learning Japanese. So it goes, around the world.

But the Terran language that is emerging out of English is not going to be much like the English we speak in San Francisco or Chicago or Boston. Any American who has been to England already knows that American English and English English not only sound different, they differ greatly in vocabulary. (A New Yorker who enters a London "subway" isn't going to find any trains, only an underground passage; what he really wants is the "underground," which Londoners often call the "tube." As for the New Yorker's "tube," that's the Londoner's "telly," right?) If the two main English-speaking countries of the world, after only two and a quarter centuries of political separation, already speak two widely differing forms of the language, what sorts of Englishes are going to evolve in Asia, Africa, and South America among people whose primary linguistic background is something else, over the next few hundreds of years? And though speakers of those Englishes may be able to understand each other, will we be able to understand *them?*

Colloquialisms are a big part of the problem. Ours, of course, baffle many foreigners, even those who know conventional English well. Taking the words at their literal meanings can lead one into dire semantic meanings. "So you're getting the hang of doing business in English now?" an American newspaperman asks the Japanese director of an automobile company in Prague. "I am getting hang?" he replies, mystified. Nor does his English-speaking Czech staff have much of a clue. "Means . . . I depend on it?" one asks. "I'd like to have it?" guesses another. "I'd like to stop it?" a third surmises.

Consider the conversation-stopping effects of all the sports metaphors we pepper our speech with—"slam dunk," "judgment call," "game plan," "home run," and so forth. (What about that vivid phrase, "peppering" our speech?) What is a nonnative speaker to make of "highbrow," "loony tunes," or "funny farm"? How are they supposed to decipher the special grammatical structures of our younger lifeforms? ("I was like, 'Come off it,' and then he goes, 'Hey, chill out, babe. . . .' ")

Worse yet, regional Englishes spoken only by those who use English as a *lingua franca* (and there's a wonderful semantic mish-mosh!) are emerging, causing new sorts of difficulties. An English linguist named Alan Firth, who is studying these problems at the University of Aalborg in Denmark, offers this transcription of a conversation (in English, more or less) between a Danish exporter of cheese and an Egyptian importer in Cairo:

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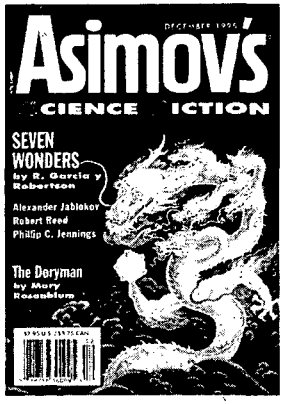

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"So I told him," the Egyptian says, "not to send the cheese after the, the blowing in customs."

The Dane, not understanding, replies cautiously, "I see, yes."

"So I don't know what we can do with the order now."

Now the Dane is worried. "I'm not, er, blowing, er—what is this, too big or what?"

"No," says the Egyptian. "The cheese is *bad*. It is, like, fermenting in the customs' cool rooms."

"Ah! It's gone off!"

"Yes, it's gone off."

So communication is achieved. But it requires a very careful procedure. The Dane doesn't have any way of knowing that what the Egyptian means by the "blowing" in Cairo customs is the sniffing of the cheese to see if it's all right. But when the Egyptian finally explains that the cheese is *bad,* light dawns for the Dane (see how metaphor pervades everything we say!) and he cries out that the cheese has "gone off." The Egyptian might well imagine him to be saying that he thinks the cheese has exploded; but since the universally comprehensible word *bad* has been uttered in a timely way, the Dane now knows about what "blowing" means to the Egyptian, the Egyptian knows what "gone off" connotes for the Dane, and—now that they both get the ticket, so to speak—they can proceed to do business. "Purists may turn in their graves as they murder the English language—and get their deal," Professor Firth observes. "It may be risky to not quite under-

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stand," he says, "but there's something to lose by saying you don't. The skilled communicators know when it's OK. Once you get the contract, you go back, clear things up—and five thousand tons of cheese are on their way to Egypt." Or, as an English-speaking Czech factory manager puts it, "One of the things we all have in common is we all speak poor English. We get by on what we have." And what they have, though it may not be the Queen's English or even the President's, is English enough to allow disparate peoples to communicate with relative ease all over the world.

As foreigners assemble Englishes of their own, and as those homegrown varieties establish themselves in different regions of the planet, the parent tongue itself is going to undergo a certain amount of pushing and pulling. It always has, beginning as a Teutonic language and absorbing heavy input along the way from the Norman French (who were of Scandinavian origin but spoke a Latin-derived language) and then from all the rest of the world. The global Terran that will emerge from English may cause some problems for those who regard English as their *mother tongue*. "Natives must understand," says Franciszek Grucza of the Warsaw Institute of Linguistics. "They say, 'This is our language, not yet yours.' I say it's not true. English is not the language of American or British natives only. This is our language too." And it will undergo some very strange metamorphoses indeed on its way to becoming the planetary lingo.

Or the interplanetary one. In one of my favorite SF stories, James Blish's "Common Time," a spaceman making a faster-than-light voyage meets the beadmungen, spacefaring aliens who tell him, "We-they pitched that the being-Garrard with most adoration these twins and had mind to them, soft and loud alike. How do you hear?"

And once Garrard realizes that the beadmungen are speaking to him in English, he replies, "I pitch you-them to fullest love." And so it will go, as we and the beadmungen speak English to one other amongst the celestial spheres. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

I just finished reading your October editorial and I wanted you to know that there is still a young audience true to "real" science fiction, as opposed to the novelizations of role-playing games, and that there are still young readers who would rather grab at an old Heinlein or Simak or Dick or Bester stumbled upon in a second-hand bookshop than pick up the latest *Star Trek* novel. I'll be the first to admit, there aren't many of us anymore, but we do exist, and we *all* recruit.

I started reading *Asimov's* at twelve when I first picked up my brother Jason's old copies. Now that I'm eighteen and a sophomore at the University of Illinois, I still get the magazine. There are reasons, though, why other young people don't subscribe.

First and foremost, almost no one really prints new pulp stories anymore, and many of the stories found in *Analog* and *Asimov's* are simply too adult for most young SF fans. I would jump at the chance to purchase a magazine such as you described—one with a *Star Wars* cover story, with back-up works by Orson Scott Card or Kim Stanley (or Spider) Robinson, or even old favorites like Harlan Ellison or yourself. This would be a nice way to manipulate topic-specific science fiction into introducing readers to other forms of SF.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Stone

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

I am eighteen years old, and I have read science fiction for almost as long as I've been reading. I never knew magazines like *Asimov's* existed untill I read Isaac Asimov's autobiography, *I. Asimov*. Until then, I'd only thought to look for science fiction in the SF sections of the library and book stores. After the decisive influence of the autobiography, I began searching for the magazines everywhere I went. I finally found the October issue of *Asimov's* along with two other SF magazines, hidden in between other magazines in a rather literary book store—not really catching the eye of the kind of young readers you are looking for.

And I admit it, I think we (my generation) *are* a different sort of reader—perhaps not so intimate. I could not recognize any author by sight, and probably only a few—such as Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke—by name. Maybe a few months with your magazines will change me.

The reason I am writing is that now that I've discovered SF magazines, I very selfishly don't want

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them to disappear or die a slow death. My message is this: people *don't know* you're out there. You should advertise in libraries or bookstores or even on TV, where the eyes of new readers can be caught. Give us a chance.

Marisa Widrevitz
Downers Grove, IL

Hi,

I just read October's "Reflections," and found it rather upsetting. I'm a fifteen-year-old girl and I can't wait to get my copy of *Asimov's* each month. It's sad to think other kids are missing such a great opportunity. Thanks for putting out the magazine.

Jessie Jennings
Richmond, VA

Dear Mr. Silverberg:

As a high school sophomore I, myself, have noticed many of the things that you so knowledgeably pointed out in your October column. I became interested in SF in seventh grade when I read *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Dune* books. Since then I have tried to read as many works by masters such as Herbert, Asimov, Clarke, Heinlein, Wells, and Bradbury as possible. And while I enjoy them immensely it doesn't keep me from reading more contemporary works by the likes of Wingrove, Card, Bova, and Olsen.

However my SF-reading friends and I almost exclusively buy paperbacks and used hardcovers (because they are all we can afford). Our tight budgets combined with the SF magazines' low availability and lack of advertising is, I believe, the cause of the decline in numbers of young magazine readers. I wouldn't have found out about *Asimov's* in the first place had I not come upon a *huge* stash of back issues and fallen in love with them.

Alex Shugrue
West Springfield, MA

Dear Mr. Silverberg:

I agree that many of those in the under-eighteen age group are rejecting SF to the point where their sole exposure to it is in the form of games or the familiar *Star Trek* shows. However, you failed to acknowledge that small but ever-present group of eighteen-and-under SF readers. I am fourteen years old and have been reading "real" science fiction for at least six years. At times it seems as if you believe that only those over thirty or forty have enjoyed the writing of Asimov, Heinlein, Orwell, Simak, and other science fiction greats. Well, I, too, have read and reread *Stranger in a Strange Land,* the Dune books, *Animal Farm,* and many other classics.

You also discussed the lack of such magazines for "entry-level" SF readers as *Captain Future Magazine* and *Planet Stories.* Though this absence is certainly lamentable, similar material exists in the form of young-adult books. These books are surely enough to draw many young readers to SF.

Sincerely,

Allen Robinson
Richmond, VA

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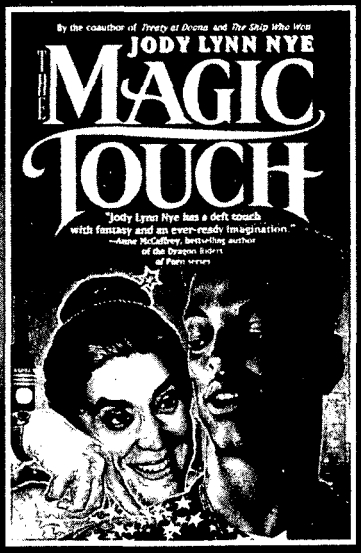
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Dear *Asimov's Science Fiction,*

While reading the October "Reflections," it occurred to me that you people were being awfully unfair to the young SF fans out here. As a fourteen-year-old fan, I thought it might be a good idea to write in and tell you so.

As a young reader, I understand how hard it is to find young SF readers. After years of searching, I am still unable to find many SF fans my age, and most of the ones I know are boys. No offense to any guys out there, but in the eighth grade you can't talk to someone of the other gender without starting all sorts of rumors. I've found a few girl fans, but they mostly prefer fantasy.

Some of us do read and enjoy quality science fiction—classic as well as recent materials. I myself am in the middle of *Stranger in a Strange Land,* and have just finished Asimov's Foundation series.

I'd like to conduct a survey of what young readers like. Any young fans out there can mail that information to me at 4023 Crawford St. Louisville, KY 40218, or e-mail me at rhianon@iglou.com. I'll send you the results.

A concerned young fan,

Jessica Bestler
from the Internet

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

I am a thirteen-year-old boy from New Jersey. I have written to say some things about your column in the October 1995 issue of *Asimov's.*

First off I would like to say that I am at fault in that if Heinlein himself walked by me I would not know who he was but this is because I do not know what he looks like. I am familiar with his stories. In fact, seconds before I started your column I finished *Stranger in a Strange Land.* I loved it. Two years ago I read *Dune* and also loved it and then (to my dismay) I made the mistake of reading the sequels.

But, I don't like the way you criticized all young SF afficionados (see, Elliott know big words). Often I find myself lumped with the so-called "Generation X" group of youth (or baby busters or whatever the old fogies that edit magazines are calling them). In fact in my mind Generation X is the name of a Marvel comic book and nothing more.

I played *Magic: The Gathering* and found it to be boring. I am now selling my cards to the highest bidder. I hate *Star Trek.* I think it also is very, very boring. I do like *Star Wars* but for one reason. Because it entertains me. And that's what it's all about, isn't it Mr. Silverberg?! Entertainment!

"I object! Defense is badgering the witness!" "Overruled!" People buy those things because they find them entertaining. It all comes down to opinions. I bet that in the day of *Dune* and *Stranger* that the old people were saying, "Why can't he read Verne and Wells? My god, now there is some writing." It all depends on opinions and time. It seems that the older people get, the more they think that what

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they like is good and what younger people like is bad.

Elliott Kalan

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

Bravo and Hurray! to Allen Steele for "The Death of Captain Future"! This is the stuff dreams are made of. As an SF fan from the time I learned to read (age 4) I can honestly say that this is a standout piece of work.

I have always felt that I was born in the wrong period of time to be an SF fan. No insult meant to the writers of today, most of whom are superb; but as a child of Generation X, a product of the nineties, I often feel cheated.

As I claw my way through the stacks of the used bookstores where I spend as much of my time and money as I can afford, I occasionally come across a copy of an old *Astounding* or *Planet Stories* that is still readable. I long to be able to pull one of these fresh off the racks, untouched, unstained and unread. To be able to pay only twenty cents for one, would, too, be a delight.

I had been planning to write anyway. I wanted to reassure you that there are young readers out there, like myself, at nineteen, my husband at twenty-six, and friends in the same age group, who not only enjoy SF, but love it. We are the ones who knew Spock before Big Bird and McCoy before Oscar the Grouch. We are the ones who actually read the dog-eared, highlighted, and underlined copies of *Stranger in a Strange Land*—handed to us by our parents. We are the ones who brought notes from our parents to let us read the books that the librarians deemed "adult." And not only did we read them, we devoured them. We ignored our peers when they teased us for discussing *Star Trek*, and the religious/philosophical aspects of Heinlein's *The Number of the Beast* or *Time Enough for Love*, instead of *Beverly Hills 90210* at the lunch table.

And it's not just Heinlein that we "young 'un's" read. We teethed on Asimov and Herbert. From where I'm sitting, I can see Mike Resnick's *Ivory*, Frank Herbert's *Hellstrom's Hive* and *The Lazarus Effect*, and Herbert and Ransom's *The Jesus Incident*. My eye falls on Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, and Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

But I have wandered far afield. In short, *we are out here*. Young readers are not as rare as one might think. And rest assured that my children will learn to read on Heinlein and Shakespeare, like myself, my husband, and our closest friends. What is not gone, is not forgotten.

Hillary Toffic
Hinesville, GA

P.S. Does anyone know where I can get an original, or even a reproduction, of the *Astounding* containing "Life-Line" by you'd better know who?

Dear Readers of *Asimov's*:

The October issue was at its regular high level of achievement with respect to its fiction. (I partic-

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ularly liked Ms. Kress's "Evolution.") The problem I had though, was with Mr. Silverberg's Reflections column. He remarked that the average audience for science fiction of *Asimov's* type is growing older, with a stagnation of new young readers.

I believe that he is right, but he never made an allusion as to the below-eighteen audience that does exist outside of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek.* I am a fifteen-year-old reader of all sorts of science fiction, including the mainstream Trek novels. I'm also deeply interested in "Golden Age" SF. My favorite novels of these are Asimov's *I, Robot,* Heinlein's *The Past Through Tomorrow,* and Clarke's *Childhood's End.* I especially like the short stories from Asimov, Ellison, and Dick. These are arguably the benchmarks of science fiction. I think that makes me worthy of reading *Asimov's,* and able to appreciate it.

I also thought Mr. Silverberg's idea of placing more mature SF alongside the Trek fare is a good one—good enough to earn my dollars.

I'm also a dedicated writer, and find myself getting better and better at writing the type of SF you see in *Asimov's.*

Who knows? Maybe someday you'll see my name alongside those other *Asimov's* writers and take heart in the fact that the younger generation has not let SF of high caliber die.

Sincerely yours,

Kenneth Nichols
Syracuse, NY

The news—from a bunch of indignant teenage readers—that plenty of members of the not-old-enough-to-vote set certainly do love science fiction in the classic mode, and assiduously hunt for the great out-of-print novels in second-hand stores, was surprising and very pleasing. I'm glad so many of you wrote in to set me straight. This is one instance where it's terrific to have been wrong.

Now, if we could only figure out some way to induce the publishers to bring more of the Right Stuff back into print. . . .

—Robert Silverberg

Dear Editors,

I have just finished reading "Thorri the Poet's Saga" (June 1995). That's about how far behind I am in reading your magazine. A wonderful story that sent me back to "Njal's Saga," which I last read twenty years ago. Whether or not this story is science fiction is for others to debate. The story is a good yarn and I can't wait for more literature of this quality.

Charles Nippert
from the Internet

Dear Sheila,

I finally got a "break in the action" and wanted to use the opportunity for something I should have done a long time ago. During brief conversations with Terri Czeczko, I had mentioned my appreciation for my latest Readers' Choice award but never properly thanked everyone for the honor.

I've always been flattered by the

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readers' recognition each and every time I've won. But I'm also extremely grateful to everyone at Dell for giving me the opportunity to do something I love for well over a decade! I appreciate the support, the chance to appear in magazines that I've always loved and for creating the poll and prize in the first place.

Thanks again, and please convey my belated gratitude to Gardner, Terri, Anthony Bari and everyone else at the magazines.

Gary L. Freeman

To the Editors . . .

Two years ago, I was rooting around in the magazine stall of my neighborhood supermarket and came across your November 1993 magazine. The cover was what caught my attention, and after a cursory glance through the magazine, I bought it. For some reason it sat unread in my bookshelf for a very long time . . . until one day I once accidentally stumbled across your July 1995 issue. I read both issues cover-to-cover and lamented the fact that I had wasted two years. Now, each month I wait with bated breath to see what new ideas will emerge in your magazine, what new writers will challenge the norms—I am hardly, if ever, disappointed. As an aspiring writer, I enjoy the fresh new ideas that appear courtesy of such writers as Allen Steele, Robert Reed, Ursula K. Le Guin and many others, not to mention Mr. Silverberg's riveting "Reflections" column.

However, I did not write this letter to simply offer idle praise for your publication and build up egos. At least, not the egos of those involved in the publication of *Asimov's*. Rather, I would like to congratulate a specific person on a marvelous piece of work: Don Webb. Mr. Webb's short story "Paradise Lost" (*Asimov's*, September 1995) was a definite masterpiece. I laughed at the subtle wit and the eventual triumph of his protagonist over the over-enthusiastic demon Seere; I mused over the possibility of such a tale becoming reality (or already being reality?); and I enjoyed the freshness with which Mr. Webb depicted the Dark Arts. I could go on and on, but will not. Suffice it to say that I look forward to seeing more of Mr. Webb's work in the pages of your truly wonderful magazine.

Sincerely yours,

Janek Cadiramen
Dubai
United Arab Emirates

Dear Editors,

I have acquired this year's editions of *Asimov's SF* and it is a real feast. In recent years there has not been much new stuff published here in Yugoslavia.

As I hope that the bookstore where I have found your magazine shall keep up the good work, I would like to suggest an author whose wonderful stories I would like to read in *Asimov's*, namely Larry Niven. I gather that he is still producing and great as ever.

Ivar Berger
from the Internet

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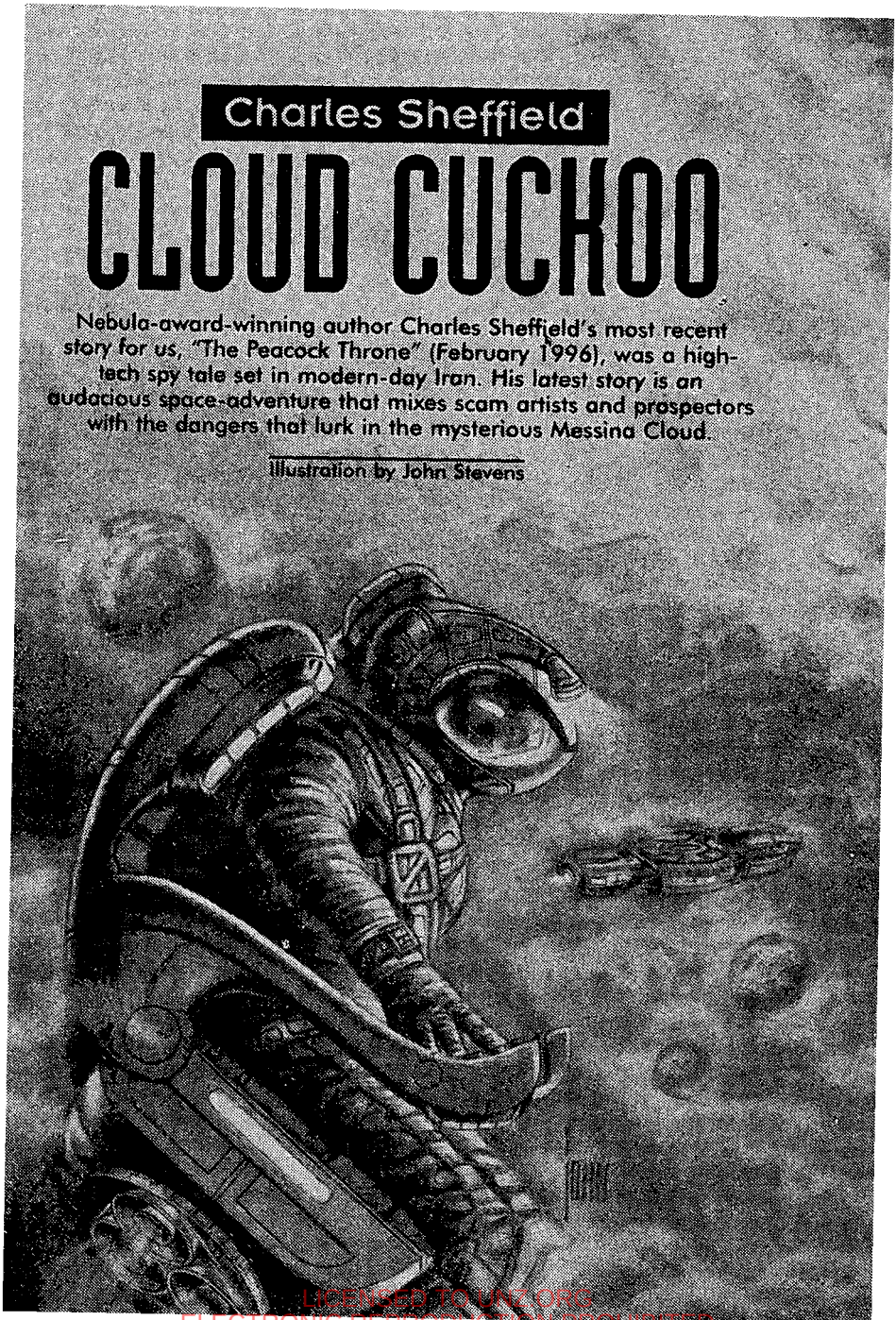
Charles Sheffield

CLOUD CUCKOO

Nebula-award-winning author Charles Sheffield's most recent story for us, "The Peacock Throne" (February 1996), was a high-tech spy tale set in modern-day Iran. His latest story is an audacious space-adventure that mixes scam artists and prospectors with the dangers that lurk in the mysterious Messina Cloud.

Illustration by John Stevens



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The Klondike Gold Rush began in 1896, when a suspect pair of prospectors known as Lying George Carmack and Tagist Charlie showed up to tell their story in Big Bill McPhee's Caribou Saloon at Fortymile. They would not have been believed, except that Lying George had a pocket full of placer gold. Bonanza Creek, he said, had so much gold dust that you could lift it off the bottom of the stream with a spoon.

This time, it turned out that George was not lying. The word didn't take long to travel south. In the next three or four years, fifty thousand optimists headed for the Yukon Territory and the promise of great wealth.

A lucky few of them found the promise kept. Many more died. This was frontier country, just a couple of degrees south of the Arctic Circle, where temperatures in the winter dropped past fifty below. Prospectors from warmer climes, inexperienced, ill-clad, and poorly equipped, starved and froze by the hundreds, or limped back south, weak and frostbitten.

It made no difference what horror stories were told by those who made it home. The next year, a new crop of hopefuls would arrive in the Yukon. The lure was too strong to resist. So more gold was found, and a few more fortunes were made, and many more people died.

"But who was it made the safest money, and the *most* money?" Tish Buford leaned back in his seat. He was a big, slow-moving man, fat and placid and almost hairless. "If you say, the lucky prospectors, then you'd be wrong. They mostly couldn't hang on to what they had. Wealth slipped through their fingers like water from a placer pan, and went to other people. People like Arthur Harper and Jack McQuesten. You know what *they* were? Shopkeepers! Arthur and Jack didn't go off scouring the wilderness, not them. They stayed safe in town, assuring the flow of supplies from farther south, and selling them—at a whopping price—to all comers. No risks, big profits. No matter what the prospectors did or didn't find, every one of them had to have food and salt and blankets and ammunition."

He was a careful storyteller, systematic and with no sense of urgency. The effect was spoiled a little by his companion, Silla Fallon, who sat on the edge of her seat, nibbled her lower lip, and watched me closely. She was a short, slim brunette in her early thirties, wild-haired and intense, and she would have looked a lot better without the frown lines on her forehead. Silla constantly seemed ready to tell Tish to get on with it.

I said nothing, and in the long silence I pretended not to notice Silla's anxious grimacing.

"Times change, and materials change, and locations change," Tish went on at last, "but greed doesn't change. With a node open to the Messina Dust Cloud, you have any number of people heading through to try their luck. Some will be in harvesters, trawling the dust rivers for stable transuranics; some will be in rakehells, risking the cloud reefs to find

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shwartzgeld and Cauthen starfires; and if history is any guide, they will have one thing in common: not one in a hundred will have thought through their own supply needs. It's prohibitively expensive in energy to keep popping through the node to Sol-side, and then going back again. Now do you see why I mentioned the Yukon, and the Klondike Gold Rush? This is the *Cloud* Rush. Anyone who goes out to the Messina Cloud with a well-stocked supply ship will be able to make a fortune selling to the explorers. No risks, and big profits. That's our plan, and my proposal to you."

"I think you have the wrong man," I said. "I'm no shopkeeper. I've spent the past twenty years chasing around the Kuiper Belt. If anything, I look like one of your crazy prospectors."

Silla frowned at me, while Tish smiled easily. "I don't want you to keep shop," he said. "Silla and I can do that very well for ourselves. I'd like you flying our ship because you're Lou Worden—Lucky Lou Worden."

"Lunatic Lou Worden, if you believe some people."

"Lunatic or Lucky, whatever. You get into situations that no one ought to survive, and you come out of them alive and in one piece."

"You said no risks."

"And I hope I'll prove right. But the way to assure safety is to assume the opposite. The Messina Dust Cloud is pretty much unknown and unmapped. The big corporations still have their hands full exploiting the other interstellar node exit points. Until they get round to the Messina it might be dangerous territory—even for shopkeepers. I don't like to waste money, but I do want the best pilot I can find. A share of your luck, too, if it's transferable. As for you, come in on the deal and you'll have one third of everything, same as me and Silla. What do you say?"

I stood up. "I say, I have to think about it."

"Very reasonable." Tish Buford stood up too. "Think about it, sleep on it. But not for too long. I have a finance meeting with Ganymede Guaranty tomorrow, and I have to tell them who will be with us on the *Lodestar*. Will that give you enough time?"

I was being hustled. No one would go so close to the wire on financing without being sure of the pilot. "I'll tell you tomorrow," I said. "At noon."

It was good enough for Tish Buford, but not for Silla Fallon. She opened her mouth, to reveal small, even teeth. If only she would smile.

"But our meeting is at noon," she protested. "We have to know before we go in whether you are with us or not."

"Eleven forty-five, then," I said. "At Ganymede Guaranty's offices."

It didn't please her, and I hadn't expected it to. I was actually going out of my way to accommodate their schedule. I had questions that Tish and Silla were unlikely to answer, and I might need every spare minute that I could get.

* * *

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Silla was waiting for me on the fortieth level of Ganymede, where the solar system's largest finance house has its main offices.

"Tish will be here," she said. "He's making final arrangements for supplying the *Lodestar*. We want to leave in two days. What did you decide?"

The Cloud Rush didn't work its magic only on harvesters and rakehells. Silla was as eager as any prospector. But at least the frown had gone. Either she reserved it for Tish, or he had asked her to be nice to me. She was actually smiling.

"I decided," I said, "that Tish Buford and Silla Fallon are not to be trusted."

The frown lines returned, but they registered bewilderment.

"Last night I did a little homework," I went on. "I recognized the name Tish Buford before you ever called me. He has a reputation, and it isn't for being a shopkeeper. If I'm Lucky Lou, he's Big-Time Tish. He's a slick operator with a dozen schemes to his credit. Ask about him beyond the Kuiper Belt or around the Uranus moons, and you find that Tish Buford is known all right—as a hotshot. He might want to be part of the Cloud Rush, but he'd be organizing the rakehells to hunt starfires, not sitting in a supply ship and playing haberdasher. So I have to ask myself, what the hell is going on?"

And why am I here, given what I've learned? But I knew the answer to that. I've realized for a long time how I get my kicks.

She was nodding, and at the same time glancing all around her. "Did you check on when those things you heard about took place?"

"No. Why?"

She stopped scanning the big lobby and stepped closer. She was not tall, and she had to tilt her face far up to gaze at mine. "What you said about Tish was quite true—once. But he's not like that now. I can explain everything, only Tish will be here any second. If you'll take my word for it that we really need you on board when we head for the Messina Cloud, and you'll agree to ship with us, I'll tell you later what happened."

"When?"

"How about tonight?" Her dark-blue eyes locked on mine. "And one other thing. You did your checking, so did we. We know you're running out of options. You've always managed to come through without a scratch, but your ships haven't. A lot of people in the Kuiper Belt don't say good things about you. You need us, Lou, as much as we need you. But nothing more now—here comes Tish."

I don't know how she knew, without looking. But she was right. He came ambling along toward us, the same easy-going smile on his face. It suggested that he had no worries at all about my decision. He knew that I was going to say yes and fly with them to the Messina Dust Cloud.

The odd thing is that he was absolutely right.

* * *

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A life without danger is like food without salt. I don't know if I could live that way. But I do know that if you want to live dangerously, with the accent on *live,* you must be more wary than lucky.

I try to practice that philosophy. Before Silla and I met for dinner, I did more checking on Tish Buford. It was possible to track his actions until a few years ago. After that there was no word of where he had been or what he had been doing.

Silla and I had agreed to meet at The Belly of the Whale, in the deepest inhabited level of Ganymede. It is a restaurant with strange foods, an eccentric clientele, and private booths shielded against sight, sound, and electronic surveillance. While I was reviewing the menu and deciding, not for the first time, that dishes made entirely from single-celled organisms could be no more than marginally edible, Silla slid into the seat opposite. She opened the little black purse that she was carrying, took out an imager, and offered it to me.

"Do you know who this is?"

It was a thin, hard-faced man with bushy eyebrows. I studied the picture. At last I shook my head. "Should I?"

"You should, and you do. It's Tish, as he was four years ago. That's when this picture was taken. That's the way he used to be."

Even with that information, even making allowances for the loss of hair and the sixty or seventy extra pounds, what she said was hard to believe. The biggest change had nothing to do with facial features. It was in the expression. Guarded, watchful eyes versus sunny and amiable ones. A tight mouth or a placid smile.

I pushed the imager back across the table. "What happened?"

She had arrived swathed from head to toe in a long, black cloak. Now, as though some critical moment had passed, she eased it off and let it fall to the seat behind her. She was wearing an off-the-shoulder dress of deep purple, and as she stared at me her eyes picked up the color.

"If you've only seen Tish now, you can't imagine what he was like when I first met him, seven years ago." Her voice became more relaxed, almost dreamy. "It was what attracted me to him. You could tell, in the first two minutes, that he was a man who didn't give a damn about convention, or danger, or what people might think. His attitude was that life was uncertain, no matter what, so you might as well play the whole thing for kicks. Everything you've heard about his actions out beyond the Kuiper Belt, or running riot on the moons of Uranus, doesn't tell the half of it. He wasn't just a hotshot, he was incandescent. He had drive, he had style, he had endless energy. He did nothing by halves, and you either went along with him for the ride, or you got out of the way. I went along."

Wine is produced by single-celled organisms. I had ordered two bottles when I first arrived at The Belly of the Whale, and now Silla raised her glass and gazed into its clear golden depths.

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"I went along, by God I did. And for three years, I enjoyed every minute of it. Then one day Tish said that his eyes felt peculiar. I put it down to lack of sleep and too much excitement. I didn't worry, because otherwise he seemed perfectly healthy and cheerful. I did notice he was putting on a bit of weight. He also seemed to be losing hair fast. A few months later, there were other changes. And they did upset me, very much; but for the wrong reason."

Silla put down her glass. Her fine eyes, with those delicate highlights picked up from her dress, stared across the table at me. "You seem like a very independent man. Have you ever been in love?"

"I'm afraid so."

That earned the first frown of the evening. "That's a depressing way to put it."

I shrugged. "Love for me has usually meant more pain than pleasure. I'm inclined to agree with the old song, I think I'd rather be in jail than be in love again."

"Pain. That's the right word. If you can say that, you'll understand what I have to say next. When Tish seemed to be losing interest in me—what I really mean is, he didn't want to have sex with me—I felt pain. For a while, I thought he must have some other woman. I became terribly suspicious. I watched him, tapped his correspondence, followed him when he went out. I was so obsessed with my own worries, and his rejection of me, that I didn't notice what else was happening. Finally I realized that there were no other women, no other men, no other anyone. Tish was going out less and less. He was putting on more weight, and he had lost almost all his hair. Instead of being wild and free and energetic, he sat around daydreaming.

"I woke up and realized that there was something seriously wrong. I dragged him to a doctor. That's a sign of how much he had changed. A year earlier, nothing I said or did would have persuaded him to be examined.

"They found he had a tumor at the base of his brain. It was a benign form called a *meningioma,* and it could be removed. That was the good news. The bad news was that we had let it go for a long time. I blame myself for that, I should have done something months earlier. What the neurosurgeon finally carved out of Tish's head was as big as this." She held out her tight-closed fist. Her hands were like the rest of her, small-boned and well-kept.

When I saw that gesture I thought of Tish Buford's head, smooth and almost hairless, and I asked myself, where is the scar?

But at the time I didn't pursue my own question. All I said was, "They got it all?"

Silla nodded. "Everything. The surgeon said that the operation was a complete success. Tish was up and walking in a couple of days. What I

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didn't realize until a few weeks later was what Dr. Maxwell *meant* by complete success. While the tumor was slowly growing, it had done major damage to the pituitary gland. Another few months and the optic chiasma would have been affected, too—Tish would have become blind.

"His eyes are fine now, but the effects on the pituitary are irreversible. He thinks as well as he ever did. His *personality* is different, though, even with hormonal supplements, so the *way* he thinks is not the same. He's actually a lot more contented than he used to be. He sleeps like a baby and he eats like a teenage boy. He doesn't *want* to change back. But *I* don't sleep like a baby, not at all. I've persuaded him that an expedition to a frontier—and the Messina Dust Cloud *is* a frontier, even if you're only out there to sell mouthwash and toilet paper—an expedition like that needs someone who doesn't assume that nothing can go wrong. It needs someone like *you*. You're a worrier."

"Maybe," I said, as I poured more wine. "But it's all relative. Silla Fallon does enough worrying for three people. Do you think that you really need me?"

"If I think we do, we do." She raised her glass and eyed me over the top of it. "Can I propose a toast? To the Cloud Rush, and a voyage that will surpass all our expectations."

I reached out and we clinked glasses. That was a toast I could drink to.

Two days were hardly enough time to get ready, even without the system-wide data-base hopping that I was doing before we left. It had to be here and now, because once we were through the node our access to anything in the solar system would be denied until our return.

That worked both ways. When the network node was finally sitting right in front of our ship, its pearly radiance as big and bright as a harvest moon on Earth, I felt the sense of urgency slipping away. Anything that I had not learned from the data banks by now would have to wait until we came back.

If we came back. The rainbow internal glow of the node was going to twist us in directions where there were no directions. We would turn out of space itself. When we emerged, we would be inside the Messina Dust Cloud, twenty-seven lightyears from Sol.

We sat side-by-side in the control room, drifting steadily and at a precisely defined velocity into the node. Silla was clearly nervous, her fingers gripping the arms of her chair. Tish leaned back, smiling, enjoying the changing colors of the node entry. And I, the ship's pilot and navigator, who until our emergence in the Messina Dust Cloud would have nothing to do, pondered the mysterious functions of the pituitary gland.

I had learned a lot about the pituitary in the past couple of days. That master gland of the human body, no bigger than a large bean, hangs suspended at the base of every person's brain. It commands the function of

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all our other glands. Directly or indirectly, it controls our growth, our desires, the production of adrenaline, all our hormone levels, and ultimately our personality.

Pituitary. When you face a number of different possible dangers, you must devote the best part of your thinking to the most lethal.

Emergence was sudden. At one moment, I felt myself turning unpredictably, in a hundred different directions at once. The next, the *Lodestar* was coasting smoothly along surrounded by the diffuse blue glow of the Messina Cloud.

We stared at the Cloud with curiosity and, in my case at least, with a good deal of awe. Its existence had been known for more than a century, a peculiar little blob of gas, far off in space, with strange spectral emission lines. It was odd enough that a Photon Information Package had been sent out to investigate. After the PIP's arrival it had used the Cloud's own materials to fabricate the first node. That one had been minute, a few millimeters across, but with a little node in place, the tiny sensor probes could be sent through, along with materials to make the node itself bigger. Long before the node was large enough to admit ships and humans, the questing probes had discovered the stable transuranics.

Those materials should not have been able to exist—nothing like them, either natural or human-made, was known anywhere else. The transuranics, artificially stabilized elements far beyond uranium, had apparently been created when the Messina Cloud itself was created, about fifty million years ago.

How, and by whom?

No one knew. There were all the signs of a super-technology at work, but whoever or whatever had made the Cloud and the stable transuranics was no longer around to answer questions. Sol-side industrialists itched to get their hands on the super-heavy elements, with their bizarre chemical properties, and even more so on the rare *shwartzgeld* and the Cauthen starfires that were also found nowhere but in the Cloud.

Of course, those industrialists were not about to do the initial exploration themselves. As soon as the node was big enough they staked harvesters and rakehells, to head through and see what they could bring back. Tish Buford was right. It was a Cloud Rush, with prizes more precious than gold, in a wonderland more magical than any cave of Aladdin.

A sense of wonder is of no great value to a pilot, but I have a devil of a time turning mine off. I sat and gaped at what I saw. The great blue and purple haze of the Cloud was shot through with streaks and swirls of brighter colors, greens and yellows and glowing crimsons. Those rainbow lines and curves defined currents and whirlpools, which taken together provided the outline for a set of broader patterns. Those must be the sluggish space-rivers of dust and gas described in the Sol-side data bases.

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Within them lay invisible pockets of stable transuranic elements, carried around some unseen center. And somewhere, I hoped not too close, were the cloud reefs. Those were regions of intense electromagnetic and gravitational fields where something very strange happened to spacetime. The rakehells explored near them, because that's where you were most likely to find *shwartzgeld* and starfires. But there you would also find space sounders, about which the Sol-side data bases were almost silent. No one knew if a sounder should be thought of as living or nonliving. We did know that rakehells had a habit of disappearing near reefs and sounders, without so much as a call for help.

While I studied the Cloud, Tish Buford had turned to the communications console. According to the node network controllers, nineteen harvesters and sixty-six rakehells were at work in the Cloud. They were our "market base." We knew there was already a thriving barter business in the Cloud, because if someone could avoid a mid-voyage return to Sol-side, the savings in time and money were large. Tish and Silla had filled the *Lodestar* with a thousand things that all the harvesters and rakehells would need and might not have thought to bring, everything from true necessities to bonbons and playing cards. As Silla said, fast travel around the solar system had made people lazy. The trick of provisioning a ship was so old that it was often neglected.

"Here we go," Tish said. "Nice of them, they've done most of our work for us."

He had hooked the *Lodestar*'s computer into the communications net maintained by the cloud harvesters and rakehells. The ships in the Cloud were in an odd situation. On the one hand they were fiercely competitive, guarding their commercial advantage. That advantage included ship location, because the technique for tracking transuranics or finding starfires was every captain's best-kept secret. On the other hand, everyone was twenty-seven lightyears from Sol. They were obliged to depend on each other for extra supplies and emergency assistance. The Cloud communications net offered a ship's identification, together with a list of materials it either needed or had enough extra to trade. If two ships wished to barter badly enough, they would meet at some agreed-to location specified in Cloud-centered coordinates.

Tish began reviewing the list, discarding every case where one ship's needs matched another's excess supplies. "Because if they can trade with each other," he said, "they certainly won't want to pay *our* prices. Let's see what's left on the demand side: *Dancing Lady, Sweet Chariot, The Pride of Dundee, Balaclava, Coruscation, Southern Cross, Never Say Die, Once-over-lightly, Walkabout,* and *The Witch of Agnesi.* Those last six are rakehells, the others are harvesters. They all show as needing things that we can supply, and no other ship is offering them. We ought to send a signal."

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He was the shopkeeper, I was the rash and reckless pilot who supposedly throve on danger. But he was moving too fast for me.

"I'll take care of that," I said. "But before we do real trading, I want to make everyone an offer they can't refuse: our goods for their information."

"Why?" Tish did not seem annoyed—he never seemed annoyed—but he looked puzzled. "Do you think we may be in trouble?"

"The ship is working perfectly, and so far as I know we're quite safe. But we only just arrived. I want to mooch around for a couple of days, ask a few questions, get a feel for the place. From everything that I've heard, the biggest danger in the Messina Dust Cloud comes from the reefs, but at the moment I wouldn't know a reef if I ran into one. Would you?"

Tish didn't answer my question, but he shrugged, smiled, and said, "That's all right. I don't mind taking it easy for a while before we begin trading. All right, Silla?"

She looked at me before she looked at him. Finally she nodded. "That's the reason Lou is here, to keep us out of trouble. Whatever he wants to do is fine with me."

They left me alone, to stare at the Cloud and try to relate what I saw to the miserably few charts that had been available for purchase Sol-side. The harvesters and rakehells might sometimes cooperate with each other, out of need, but the last thing they wanted was more competition in the Messina Cloud.

But we were not competition. We had no reason to keep our location or our business a secret—quite the opposite. I broadcast on a frequency supposedly monitored by every rakehell and every harvester, and I kept my message short.

This is the supply ship Lodestar. *We wish to trade supplies for navigation information about the Cloud. We will agree not to disclose any information revealed to us. If you are interested in trading, please contact us. Our exact Cloud location follows.*

If what I had been told about harvesters and rakehells was true, that last piece of data should be the clincher. Only a supply ship would let others know its position.

On the other hand, a rapid reply was too much to hope for. The Messina Cloud might be small in interstellar terms, but it was as big as the solar system. Even the nearest ship probably had a round-trip signal time of twenty minutes.

I settled down to wait, studying the panorama on the display screens and speculating that the tiny dark pinpoint far off to one side might well be a reef. At maximum magnification, the ship's scope showed a swirl of bright blue around a dark center, like an iris of glowing dust around an angry black pupil. Until I knew more about reefs, I felt no desire to go closer.

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While I was busy at the scope, Silla glided back in. She was holding a transparent plastic flask filled with a golden liquid.

"I thought you might still be working," she said. "Here. It's the same variety as you ordered at The Belly of the Whale, and we seemed to enjoy it there. I made sure we'd have plenty on board—and it's not all for trading."

"Thank you. I did like the wine." I took the flask from her. "And also the company. Will you join me?"

She gave me a glance from the corner of her eye, but she hesitated before she said, "I'd like to. Let me check something, and I'll be right back."

"Fine. But why not come to my cabin? We'd be a lot more comfortable."

She looked me straight in the eye. "All right." This time there was no hesitation at all.

As soon as she was gone, I headed aft to my cabin. On the way I stopped by the medical facility. I shook the flagon vigorously—a terrible way to treat any wine, but it had to be well-mixed—and delivered a sample to the analysis unit.

The readout was unambiguous. The flask contained wine, and nothing but wine. The analyzer provided a full breakdown of composition, but it offered no comments on quality.

That was all right. I was willing to decide that for myself..

I was sitting at ease in my cabin when Silla came in. I had poured the wine from the flask into a glass. Low gravity or no low gravity, you will never make me like sucking good wine from a rubber tit. Even *bad* wine deserves better.

"It's all right," Silla said as she came hurrying in. "He's sound asleep and snoring. Nothing will wake him up until morning."

Which put an end to any possible doubts. It was nice to know that there were going to be no pretenses or false modesty. I put down my wine. "You look gorgeous," I said. "I've wanted to do this since the moment I first saw you." And I took her in my arms.

She was just as warm, willing, and ready as I had expected. I feel sure that on her side she had no reason to complain of my level of excitement.

It would be easy to sneer, and say, "This is a man who claims to get off on danger? Where's the danger in screwing a woman while her brain-damaged husband is snoring his pumpkin head off? It's about as daring as shooting a duck that's tied to the end of your rifle." If so, I can only reply that my pulse never raced more madly, nor did I ever find contact with any woman more thrilling than that first night with Silla Fallon.

After we had made strenuous and intense love, and were lying quietly side by side, she felt the need to talk.

"I don't feel good about this," she said.

"Sorry. I did my best."

She nuzzled my shoulder. "You were wonderful, and you know it. I

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mean I don't feel good about Tish . . . but I can't help myself. I feel delicious, too, all warm and easy and boneless. I don't want you to think that I'm some sort of animal, though . . . you see, it's been years and years . . . he just has no interest . . . I've never done this with anyone else. . . ."

She displayed the first stage of an affair with someone other than her long-time mate. It is the *mea culpa* confessional phase: "You must think I'm so bad, and I am. But I've never done anything like this before. . . ." Next comes phase two, justification: "I did my best to be true to him, I really did. But he doesn't seem to understand that I'm not made of plastic, I'm flesh and blood. I have needs that he can't satisfy, and he just doesn't care. Not the way that you care. . . ."

And finally, phase three, the new commitment: "I don't want to leave you, ever. I told him this morning that it's all over. He didn't take it well. Would you believe it, he blames *me*."

Of course, there can be yet a fourth stage, of break-up with the new lover, return to the original partner, and abject repentance: "Can you ever forgive me, dear? I must have gone crazy—he *made* me crazy. But most of all he made me realize how wonderful *you* are. I'll never look at another man as long as I live."

There were sound reasons why I could not see Silla Fallon in that final phase; but maybe I could nudge her along from phase one, confession, to phase two, exculpation.

"It's not your fault, and it's not his fault," I said. "The pituitary gland decides the level of many hormones in the human body—including testosterone. With a badly damaged pituitary, a man would likely feel no sex drive at all. More than that, he wouldn't be able to imagine how you were feeling."

She snuggled up against me. "*No one* could imagine how I'm feeling. I'd forgotten what this was like, what it can be like when everything goes right. Hold me close, Lou. I wish I could stay just like this forever. It's so hard to think of going back—to nothing."

I held her close, and I thought, so much for phase two.

It also seemed to me that Silla was moving with unseemly haste toward phase three.

The next morning, there were three replies in the *Lodestar* communications center. The rakehells *Never Say Die* and *The Witch of Agnesi* were interested in trading for supplies, but only if and when we got to the far side of the Cloud. That was a week or more away, even at our best speed.

The reply from the *Walkabout* was different. That rakehell was less than a day's flight away, and willing to tell us its location.

"Be happy to meet with you." The sender of the recorded message, who identified himself as the captain of the *Walkabout*, had chosen to provide a head-and-shoulders video as well as audio. Gerard Eng looked about

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fifty, a fat-faced man with an insincere smile and a booming voice. "Meet you, I mean, provided that you can come to us. We're sitting just outside the Dodman Reef, on your side of it, and we won't move. Call us if you need routing directions. I doubt if you will. We're only sixteen hours from you and there's no other reef between us."

Sixteen hours: that's how long it had been since I'd complained that I wouldn't know a reef if I saw one. If that was to change I had to clear the decision to head for Dodman's Reef with Tish and Silla. It ought to be a formality. Silla was standing by my side as I played back the message, and if she wasn't actually rubbing her body up against me, she more than made up for that by the dreamy glow on her face.

As for Tish, he didn't seem to have a care in the world. Reefs, rakehells, his mistress, or anything else, they didn't worry him a bit. He was standing on my other side, with a smile of glowing contentment that out-did Silla's.

Which left only one person to worry and wonder as the *Lodestar* cruised on, through a cloud of increasing opacity and brilliance, toward the Dodman Reef. I was able to confirm from our general data base that the captain of the *Walkabout* was Gerard Eng. That was all I learned. I could not determine what Eng sought to obtain from us, or what information he might provide in return.

Meanwhile, our surroundings offered mysteries of their own. I had noticed on our arrival through the node the tiny swirls of rainbow color that helped the eye to fathom the structure of the Messina Cloud and to map the great dust currents within it. At the time, those little pinwheels had seemed remote, decorative, and harmless.

Now one of those pretty playthings was growing steadily in the hemisphere of sky ahead. There was infinite detail to be seen within the glowing blue eye of the Dodman Reef. Bright bands of green and white and turquoise knotted and braided and shifted as the *Lodestar* moved closer. At the very center of the glimmering iris sat a black, lifeless pupil: the eye of the reef.

It seemed a perfect blackness, but was actually a ring vortex, a dense torus of dust and gas rotating in on itself. Powerful electromagnetic and gravitational fields held the ring stable, and the eye formed a hole in the middle of the ring. If a ship passed through the *exact* center of the eye, according to Cloud lore, it would experience a big change in speed but it would not be damaged. Go through even slightly off-center, and your ship would be torn apart.

So why would a sane captain go anywhere near a reef?

I knew the answer to that: for the treasures, the Cauthen starfires and the *shwartzgeld*. The starfires were strange, fist-sized gemstones. Indestructible by any technology known to humans, they possessed an unworldly clarity and brilliance and an internal fire that constantly changed. They came embedded in big lumps of jet-black material, the

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shwartzgeld, as dark and sticky as licorice. The stuff was otherwise totally inert, like a solid version of a noble gas. Even a smallish piece was worth a great deal of money to the Sol-side industrial labs.

And a starfire? That was almost priceless. Any rakehell crew lucky enough to find a starfire and return Sol-side with it would make as much money in that single trip as any harvester of stable transuranics might hope to make in ten voyages to the Cloud.

As we neared the Dodman Reef, one more event took place that convinced me how right I had been to seek information about the Cloud before doing much exploration.

It was not late, but Tish had already headed forward to go to bed. According to Silla, he displayed less and less energy. Nowadays he often drowsed away most of the day as well as all evening and night. After he left, the two of us moved to the observation turret of the *Lodestar*. She was sitting by my side, running her fingers along the dark fine hair of my forearms in a proprietary and sensual way, when I noticed a change taking place outside.

The tenuous gases of the Messina Cloud seemed to have thickened in one region ahead of us. A curious silvery glitter had appeared there, tiny sparkles that dotted the near-vacuum with a billion flecks of light. At the same moment the ship's general circuit began a strange high whining, *shreep-shreep-shreep,* at a frequency so high it was at the very limit of my hearing.

"Is it another ship?" Silla whispered. Her fingers tightened on my arm.

I shook my head, as the sparks of light dwindled and faded to leave an emptiness of a curious eye-drawing clarity. Moving to fill the space was something that was at first sight another reef, its black unwinking eye directly ahead of us. The new object had the same ring structure, and at the center sat a similar dark pupil. But the central eye was not round. It was octagonal. Around the perimeter of the ring sat eight ragged blue-white tendrils, pointing outward and thinning gradually to invisibility. Next to the tendrils the pattern of background stars was compressed and distorted, so that the whole object had a rough eight-fold symmetry.

And the thing was moving. Not toward us, but drifting sideways and slowly turning. As it rotated I realized that the octagonal ring was merely a part of something bigger, the head on a long, sinuous body. The body itself was black, visible as it occulted the glowing gas clouds behind it. Again, the star patterns beyond were twisted to map out a halo around the dark body.

"It's a space sounder," I said softly, though there was no reason in the world why I had to whisper. "We don't want to get too close."

We stared in silence. It was easy to imagine a living creature, wriggling its way through the gas plumes that stretched between the reefs. On the other hand, although by interstellar standards there was plenty of gas and dust in the Messina Cloud, it was still close to a perfect vacuum. A

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human would die in a minute here without a suit. What could survive in open space?

More details were becoming visible. The slow rotation of the sounder allowed me to gain an idea of its size. The body trailed out in space, a tapering kilometers-long sack. I could make out black lines along its length, and at the front end the dark eye was revealed now to be an open octagonal maw. It was huge, easily big enough to swallow up the whole of our ship.

I was all set to fly the *Lodestar* to a safer distance when space again became thick-flecked with luminous sparks and filled with a diffuse blue fog. The sounder vanished into that glowing mist, while the same *shreep-shreep-shreep* that had announced the sounder's arrival came again, fast diminishing in both pitch and volume.

"It's sounding," I said quietly. The noise faded to nothing. Space returned to an unusual clarity. Within seconds, the sounder had vanished.

Silla immediately did the same, leaving the observation turret without a word. I thought that was probably it for the night, but she was back in no more than a minute carrying a couple of flasks of wine.

"You've earned this," she said.

I didn't think I had, not yet; but I suspected that before morning I was going to. Danger apparently had the same effect on Silla as it did on me.

There was no more discussion. It's curious how something that was new yesterday is taken for granted today.

Lying George Carmack and the Klondike Gold Rush were twenty-seven lightyears away in space and two hundred and fifty years removed in time; but if someone had sworn that Lying George was standing in front of me, re-born in the person of Gerard Eng, I would have believed him.

The video of Captain Eng had not done him justice. He was a bloated sack of a man, whose head and short neck rose above a vast, spreading chest that descended in turn to a great pudding belly. His bare arms were thicker than my thighs. Add to that a pair of shifty eyes peering out of slits in the fat face and a loud voice that alternately blustered and whined, and the result was someone I would not trust to tell me the time.

A fairly typical rakehell captain, from everything that I had heard. Anyway, at the moment Gerard Eng was all that I had.

"This, and this," he was saying, "and at least a dozen of these." Tish Buford had provided Eng with a list, and every item that he chose was punctuated with a stabbing gesture of his thick left forefinger. "But don't you have any high-pressure cylinders—I mean, *really* high pressure?"

"We do." Tish was awake, and this morning he seemed more alert. "The only reason you don't see them is because what you are holding is just a partial listing."

"Why not let us make a copy of the whole thing, then? Your prices are horrible, but since I'm not paying 'em, who cares?" Eng sniggered at his

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own wit. "And we may want to trade more supplies for additional information. Hell, now that I've seen some of the goodies you've got, who knows? I might even *buy* something."

"That already occurred to us. Here." Silla handed a data egg to Gerard Eng. "This has our complete inventory as of today. It gives full specifications, pictures, and prices of every product. No need to give this back—you can keep it and load it on to your data base any time that's convenient."

Eng had been scanning through and marking the rest of the list. If he was surprised by Silla's generosity, he gave no sign of it. He merely sniffed, handed over the marked list, and said, "Here's what I'd like. Tell me what you think you need, and I'll see if we can make a deal."

"Lou?" Tish Buford said. "Your department."

"I know what I want." I moved forward to stand in front of Gerard Eng. "Though I don't know if you can give it to me, and I don't know how to put a value on it. I'll leave that to the rest of you. I want the best charts of the Messina Cloud that can be found, with the location of every dust river and reef and any other oddities. *And*"—I reached the kicker just as Eng was beginning to nod agreement—"I want to know the present location of every ship, harvester as well as rakehell."

It was a long shot, but I was borrowing a rule from Tish Buford: places and times change, but people don't. If I were in Gerard Eng's position I would worry constantly what my competition was up to. He ought to have knowledge of that, even if he didn't want to reveal it.

"Why do you want to know ship positions?" Eng looked at me, as though we had just become partners in crime.

"You said it yourself. People have to see what we can offer before they really covet it. Most of them won't come to us. So we have to go to them, and show what they're missing if they don't trade."

I could watch the machinery grinding away inside Gerard Eng's head. He was greedy, and he was gluttonous, and he really wasn't very bright. He was looking for the down side, but at the same time he was wondering what else he might pry out of us if he made a deal.

"You won't reveal anything that I tell you to anyone else?" he asked at last.

"I already made that promise."

"How do I know you'll keep it?"

"You don't. But why wouldn't we?"

"Hm." Eng turned back to Tish Buford. "Let me have another look at that list."

Greed had won, as usual, and the rest was a formality. For the price of half a dozen more items from the *Lodestar*'s stores, we came away from the *Walkabout* with a list of ships and estimated current locations. As a bonus, I received random information about the Cloud, delivered in Gerard Eng's odd mix of bravado and cringing.

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"I thought we had a good shot at a starfire when I first spoke to you," he said. "That's why I refused to move from Dodman Reef."

"You didn't find one?" asked Silla.

"Would I be here if I had?" Eng snorted. "You wouldn't see the *Walkabout* for dust if we had a starfire on board. Any rakehell who hauls in a Cauthen starfire heads for the node at maximum drive. One starfire in mint condition Sol-side, the whole crew has it made. No one need ever work again."

"Is that right?" said Tish. He spoke politely, but without real interest. It was approaching his sleep time. He wanted to get back to the *Lodestar* and into bed for the usual fourteen hours.

When I die and go to Hell, I expect the place to seem strange at first; then it will begin to feel like home; and then, sooner than you might think, I won't be able to imagine living anywhere else.

Every day for forty days, we cruised the alien deeps of the Messina Dust Cloud. We sought the harvesters and rakehells, to meet them, show off our wares, and leave behind a data egg listing the supplies that we had to offer. Even with the best charts that I could buy, it was a tricky business. I flew us along the great dark rivers of dust, sometimes feeling my way through high-opacity clouds of high-temperature gas, sometimes coasting along in an emptiness of the curious clarity that told of recent sounder presence. The reef singularities seemed to be everywhere. They were something to note and carefully avoid, but not all had been mapped.

It was great stuff if you happen to find that sort of thing exciting; as I do.

And during those forty days, Silla and I made love just about everywhere in the ship except Tish's cabin. That presented special problems. For one thing, he was almost always in there. Random, opportunistic, quirky sex should have been great stuff, too. It became less and less so, though Silla pretended otherwise.

In fact, the exotic became the routine so completely that I was surprised when it ended. But one day it did, when we visited our last rakehell, the *Moonglow,* and delivered to its crew the little data egg containing our inventory.

"What now, Tish?" I said as the two ships separated. I was the captain and pilot, but he was the leader of our party.

"We wait," he replied. "Wait for people to call us with their orders. But we don't do it here. Do you remember the first reef you saw when we entered the Cloud?"

"I'll never forget it."

The Ushant Reef, it was, not far from the node, though of course at the time I hadn't known the name of that angry eye.

"Can you take us there?"

"Sure."

Didn't it make more sense to wait for calls in the *center* of the Cloud,

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where potential customers were scattered evenly in all directions? Sure it did. But I said nothing, and set course for the Ushant Reef.

If the previous forty days had been routine, the week and a half that followed was boring. We arrived at the reef, and soon the communications net brought a dozen messages from harvesters and rakehells. They declared themselves willing to buy supplies, even at our inflated prices; but Tish, who for the past couple of weeks had shown less and less interest in anything, gave them all a cool and indifferent reply: If you want to come here and trade with *Lodestar,* fine. Otherwise, forget it.

Not surprisingly, no one came. Why buy from a salesman who doesn't seem to care?

The early evening of the eleventh day brought a different sort of message, this one broadcast to everybody in the Cloud. It came from the rakehell *Merry Monk,* a ship I remembered from our visit as crowded, filthy, and anything but shipshape. Old food and food wrappers had been all over the place, and the medical facility was used as a dump for trash.

Cleanliness, however, is like virtue. It must be its own reward, because material benefits often go elsewhere. The *Merry Monk*'s message announced that they were hell-bent for the node at maximum acceleration. Everyone else was warned to stay well out of the way. The inference was obvious. They had snagged the biggest benefit of all, a Cauthen starfire, and were heading Sol-side.

From the range-rate data of the message, I could determine the *Merry Monk*'s trajectory. At its closest, the rakehell would be just a few hours' flight from our holding point on the flank of the Ushant Reef.

I went forward and gave Tish the news. He was lying stretched out on his bed, eyes closed. He just grunted. That was all right with me. Something was finally happening, even if Tish would admit nothing.

I moved next door to Silla's cabin and told her about the broadcast message. She was on her bunk also, bare-footed and dressed in white shorts and a white halter. She had just showered and was drying her hair.

"Lucky *Merry Monk,*" she said. "We ought to hold a celebration for their good fortune." She smiled up at me.

"Here?" I needed to have a celebration defined.

She glanced at the mess of damp clothing on the bunk. "Your cabin, I think, unless it's as bad as this. I'll be there as soon as I'm dry. Take some wine and have a glass while you're waiting. There's plenty in the locker."

I took two bottles from the half dozen and headed for my cabin. On the way I stopped at the medical facility.

It was wine, just as Silla had said. But this time it was not only wine. The analysis unit belched and made a face at me. It didn't approve of what I had given it. In addition to ethyl alcohol, the wine contained something else.

When the valleys and fused peaks of the chromatograph jumped onto the screen, I knew what I had even before the verbal confirmation: lis-

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somer, the original and best known of the neural inhibitors; the weapon of choice for hesitant or uncertain murderers.

The wine was doctored, but the added drug would not kill me. Taken orally, the slow way, lissomer needs an hour or so to be absorbed into the bloodstream and cross the blood-brain barrier. Then it goes to work to shut down the voluntary nervous system while leaving the functions of the hypothalamus and the autonomic nervous system intact. The heart goes on beating. The subject still breathes, sweats, and digests, but for the next twelve to forty-eight hours, depending on the dose, remains unconscious.

After that, assuming I had not been disposed of in the meantime by some other method, feeling and control would slowly return to my body.

I erased the display. With the old tingle in my spine, I headed for my cabin. The contents of the two flasks went into a big container. I refilled the flasks from opened bottles, and poured myself a glass. The old wine was already slightly oxidized and its temperature was too high. So far as taste was concerned, I suspected that I would prefer the other stuff, even though it would add a new meaning to the term "paralytic drunk."

I lay on my bed and wondered when Silla would show up. She had invited me to take a glass of wine while I was waiting, but she couldn't rely on my doing so without her. She would have to come along and drink with me in order to be sure. I had no doubt that she could do so safely. Only a crazy person or a suicide drinks slow poison without taking something to neutralize it. Silla was far from crazy.

As for my selection of two flasks of adulterated wine from the locker, that was the oldest trick in the book. Every bottle in that locker would contain lissomer.

It seemed like a long wait, but I was keeping an eye on the time. In less than ten minutes, Silla came hurrying in.

"Sorry," she said. "All of a sudden *he* wanted to talk about the *Merry Monk*'s find. Here's to it, and to us."

She grabbed the glass that I gave her and took a big gulp. Her absence of reaction proved what I had long suspected. Silla had the discerning wine palate of a Ganymede slophead. But there was an urgency in her manner, and an intensity that I had never seen before.

Did she want to be sure that we made love before the drug took hold? Is there an added piquancy to fucking a man whose limbs may weaken and slow during the act itself? I don't know.

We drank one flask, then she put down her glass. She moved close and began to undress both of us, slowly and systematically. Her fingers were trembling. She knew the dose, and I had drunk enough.

Is there an added piquancy to sex on the brink, sex with a passionate woman who, when you are done, will quite likely want to kill you? You bet there is.

Silla and I made lyrical and extravagant love. Afterward, we lay en-

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twined in sweaty and companionable darkness. Even the wildest love-making has its own routine, its gamut of the possible, and normally at this point we talked about whatever came into our heads or drifted toward contented sleep. Tonight I lay silent with eyes closed until at last she eased her warm body away from mine.

"Lou. Can you hear me? Sit up."

She poked me in the ribs, twisted my ear, and pinched the skin of my cheek. I did not move. I began to worry about the amount of proof she needed. One look for eye-pupil dilation and I was screwed.

Then she was on her feet and dressing. Five minutes after she left the cabin, the *Lodestar*'s drive went on, and I felt the two and a half gees of maximum acceleration.

A pilot's sleeping quarters have the best displays of any cabin on the ship, but they do not include imaging of internal conditions. In my bunk, I could flip from one external viewing camera to another, but I could not see what Tish and Silla were doing inside the *Lodestar*.

I could, however, make a guess. One or both of them was preparing for a trip through open space. The navigation data display showed our heading, and we were making for a point of tangential approach to the trajectory of the *Merry Monk*. Our velocity profile showed that in another few hours we would achieve a rendezvous with the speeding rakehell.

I lay quiet on my bunk, turned off the displays, and waited. Three times Silla came into my cabin and leaned over my naked body. She was close enough for me to feel her breath on my cheek. The hand that touched my chest was trembling.

Lou Worden, the man to live up to the reputation, would have grabbed her breasts and shouted, "Boo!" I remained motionless and silent. After a few seconds, she left.

It was just as well that she did not stay longer and look a bit more closely. My dumb old hindbrain confuses danger with sexual excitement. I had been getting an erection as she bent over me. Maybe "Lunatic Lou" wasn't so bad a description after all.

Six hours is no time at all when you are sleeping. When you are doing something interesting, it can fly by. When you are fully alert but forced to remain immobile, it lasts forever. I couldn't believe how slowly the silent minutes crept past, until at last the *Lodestar*'s drive went off and we were in freefall.

I switched on the viewing screens. Another ship showed on our forward display. The *Merry Monk*'s drive was off, like ours, and we had no relative motion.

Again I waited. It would be better for me if Tish and Silla went together to the other ship, but I didn't expect that. Sure enough, after a few more minutes a single suited figure left the *Lodestar*'s lock and jetted away through the glowing gulf of the Cloud.

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I thought it was Tish, but it made no difference. I had to act. I slipped into dark clothing and sneaked from my cabin. If I encountered Tish or Silla before I reached the medical facility, then an old-fashioned technique of attack would have to serve. I hoped that the other person on board would stay forward, close to the exit lock.

Everything felt unnaturally quiet as I ordered what I needed from the pharmacopeia and hovered impatiently—wait, wait, wait—while it was prepared and dispensed. Tit for tat. Injected straight into the bloodstream, pure lissomer acts super-fast. I loaded a porcupine pad with the drug and attached it to the palm of my left hand.

Then it was time to move again. As I went to the open door of the medical facility, I wondered what I would do if I met Tish or Silla *wearing a suit*. Could the pad's tiny hollow needles penetrate that tough resilient material?

I didn't have to worry for very long. As I left the medical facility and emerged into the corridor, Silla was standing in front of me. Her mouth opened in a gasp of surprise, at the same time as my swinging palm cuffed her lightly on her bare neck.

"Lou!" she cried. Her hand went to her throat and her eyes dilated. She had time for one step backward, then I had to hold her relaxing body to prevent it floating away along the corridor. The pad on my left hand recharged itself, with a soft hiss more like a viper than a porcupine.

I was not going to make the mistake that she had made with me. I took Silla and hooked her up to the medical unit's telemetry. Her vital signs were satisfactory and her autonomic nervous system continued to function—I saw her pupils contract in the brighter light—but she was quite unconscious.

I unhooked the telemetry, took her along to the control room, and placed her in one of the chairs. I made sure that the tape I used to secure her was unbreakable, but not uncomfortably tight.

And now it was time to worry about Tish. I thought I knew what he and Silla were up to, but suppose that I was wrong? It was a big relief when the external cameras showed a diminutive suited figure gliding out of the *Merry Monk*'s lock and heading home to the *Lodestar*.

He didn't have a chance. I approached from behind after he was through the lock, had his helmet off, and was intent on the suit seals. One slap at the nape of his neck was all it took. I taped him to the chair next to Silla.

A couple of other things had to be done before I could return my attention to them. The contents of the pockets of Tish's spacesuit were no surprise. One innocuous-looking data egg. And one glorious Cauthen starfire. I stood staring into the depths of that gemstone for longer than I should have. The inner fires were glorious. You felt that you could lose yourself in them forever.

Finally I roused myself, put on a suit, and went over to the *Merry Monk*.

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It was pretty wild in there. Over a dozen men and women were aboard, and after they got the starfire they must have decided that the find justified something special. They had been in the middle of a big orgy—a nontrivial cooperative exercise in high-gee—when they became unconscious.

I disentangled a couple and examined them. Lissomer again, in smaller dosage. They would begin to stir in another ten hours. I removed the medical telemetry, left them as I found them, and headed for the *Lodestar*. The crew of the *Merry Monk* were going to have quite an awakening: stark naked, the starfire gone, their ship floating free in the middle of nowhere. It would take real determination to keep that orgy going.

Back aboard the *Lodestar,* everything was quiet. Tish and Silla had not stirred, and the tape that held them was exactly as I had left it. However, I was not prepared to wait for another day or two until they awoke. I went to the medical unit and ordered a counteragent for lissomer. While it was being prepared and dispensed, I pulled up the list of side effects. The worst one was a troublesome vertigo. The lissomer neutralizer had to jump-start the eighth cranial nerve, which controls both hearing and balance.

My two captives awoke almost simultaneously. Tish's eyes blinked open, he glanced around, and then he focused on me. His face wore its customary amiable smile.

As Silla's eyes opened, she saw me, too. She did not smile. She shook her head as though perplexed, her forehead wrinkled, and she said, "Lou. What's happening? Why am I tied up like this?"

I shook my head, not in perplexity but in admiration. "You know something?" I said. "You two are the best, the absolute best. You wake up and open your eyes. You feel lousy and you don't know what happened. But right away you're in character. You know there was a screw-up, yet there isn't one word or look of accusation between you."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tish Buford seemed hopelessly bewildered.

"Give it up, Tish," I said. "You're wasting your time and mine. I've been over to the *Merry Monk*. The lissomer was in the data eggs, right? You discharge it into the air of any harvester or rakehell whenever you choose, by a coded signal. The crews do the work, *you* get the benefit." I held up my hand. "This!"

The Cauthen starfire glittered eerily in the sterile white light of the cabin. A look passed between Tish and Silla, just for a moment.

"You'll never be able to sell it, Worden," Tish said. "You don't have the contacts."

"I'll keep it to look at, then. Are you and Silla partners?"

"Of course we are."

"Full partners? I mean you know about—well, everything." I glanced at Silla, who raised one eyebrow.

"Oh, *that,*" Tish said. "Sure I did. When you're a team, you both have

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to know what's going on. Not the details, of course. There's some things she won't tell even her own brother. You're wrong, though, about one thing. Silla and me aren't the best. We only *thought* we were." His face had subtly altered. The features were unchanged, but their set was different. "Come on, Worden, don't play with us. Tell us how you figured it out, then get this over with."

"All in good time. I still have to satisfy my curiosity. For instance, why were you so careful on most things and so slipshod on a couple of details? Silla said you'd had a brain tumor, but you didn't bother to give yourself a scar. And Silla mentioned a Dr. Maxwell, but I checked and I couldn't find a neurosurgeon with that name. You blew it right at the beginning!"

When I started that speech, I was very interested in knowing the answers. By the time that I got to the final sentence, it didn't seem to matter. I couldn't concentrate any more on Tish and Silla. A dreadful feeling of unease was seeping like liquid nitrogen up my spinal column and into my brain.

It wasn't anything in the ship. So what was it? I walked across to the pilot's seat, sat down, and stared at the forward display. The node was visible as a tiny point of light, far ahead. I don't remember any specific thought, but my fingers jabbed at the console to take us to the node at maximum acceleration. At once I was pressed back into my seat by two and a half gees.

I heard a strangled grunt from behind me. I turned, and saw that it came from Tish. His face was distorted by the gee force and his head was pressed against the seat back, but that wasn't the reason for his excitement. He was straining forward, and he stared unblinking at a rear display screen.

The backward view of the Cloud on the screen was not quite right. As I watched, a million sparkling flecks of light appeared. I heard the high whining of the ship's general circuit, while at the same time my eyes picked out a familiar shape occluding part of the glowing background of gas.

Two and a half gees of acceleration is fairly high for humans, but apparently it is nothing to a sounder. In another ten seconds the dark body looked three times as big. It closed on the *Lodestar* with frightening speed. The *shreep-shreep-shreep* had ended. No one spoke. Our effort to escape the pursuing black ghost was conducted in total silence.

I could see both the forward and aft screens, and it was going to be touch and go. The node was ballooning ahead, but the maw of the sounder, surrounded by its space-warping blue-white tendrils, filled half the rear display.

Suppose that it followed us into the node? There was no record of such an event, but I could not rule out the possibility.

It made no difference. We were committed. The rear display was now totally dark. In the moments before we entered the node, the flickering

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field within the cabin suggested that we were already within the maw's influence. At the last split-second, I hit the switch to kill our drive. Node transfers are not tolerant of accelerated motion.

Disorientation hit me. I was turning and spinning and whirling in a hundred directions, surrounded by a shimmering rainbow of colors. It could mean we were within the node. It could mean we were inside the sounder. It might mean *both.*

And then it was over. The rainbow vanished. The blue glow of the Messina Cloud had disappeared. The *Lodestar* floated alone in space. Bright but far off, the tiny disk of Sol glowed its welcome.

I looked at the rear display screen. The node hung in space behind the *Lodestar,* pearly and peaceful. The sounder was gone.

I heard a loud sound of exhaled breath. It was Tish.

"Well, that explains one thing," he said.

Not to me it didn't; but Silla was nodding. "Explains *what?*" I asked.

"Why the rakehells head right for the node," Silla said.

"But we're not a rakehell." I still didn't get it.

"Of course not. But we have a *starfire.* The rakehells don't tell people Sol-side—why inform the competition?—but they must all know. Anyone with a starfire is a candidate for sounder attack. For some reason, the starfires are very important to the sounders. Fortunately, they can't travel through a node in pursuit of one. I wonder how many rakehells had to be swallowed up, before someone figured out what was happening?" She frowned at me. "You *knew* all this. You *must* have."

"But I didn't!"

"Then why did you turn on the drive and head flat-out for the node? If you hadn't done that just when you did, we would never have made it."

My turn to frown. "I don't know. It just seemed like the right thing to do."

I heard a groan from Tish. "I'm getting a terrible suspicion," he said. "Let me ask you one thing, Worden, and I'll never speak again. Tell me what you were saying just before you turned on the drive. About Silla and the tumor."

I had to think hard before I could even remember. The past few minutes had driven everything before them out of my head. "Silla told me you'd had a brain tumor," I said. "But you didn't have a scar. And she mentioned a Dr. Maxwell. But I couldn't find a neurosurgeon with that name."

"And *that's* what made you suspicious?" Tish's face twisted with disbelief. "Maxwell was my doctor's *first* name, for God's sake. He is Dr. Maxwell El-Bazi, a friend of ours. And you expected a *scar?* Don't you know how operations like mine are done? There *is* a scar—if you know where to look." He opened his mouth wide and curled his top lip upward for a moment.

"You won't be able to see it from there," he went on, "but Maxwell went in between my upper lip and my front teeth, on into the sinus cavities

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and then to the base of the brain. He used a fiber optic microscope, excised tissue with a flexible scalpel, and removed it with a suction tube. No visible scar, not much bleeding. It's a routine operation."

He turned to Silla. "You see it, don't you?"

"I do. But seeing isn't believing." She looked at me. "I have one question, too. You didn't drink the wine. How did you know *not* to? How did you know it wasn't one of a hundred *other* things that we might have done? You couldn't possibly check everything."

I didn't know what she was getting at. "But it *was* the wine," I said.

Tish groaned again. "I *knew* it. He didn't test *anything* else! Not a damned thing. He didn't *need* to. My God, Silla, we should have known better! Never mess with a lucky man. Luck isn't transferable. No matter what we did or how much we planned, he'd stumble through and come out on top!"

It's annoying when luck gets the credit for everything, but I'm used to that. "You really did have a tumor, then?" I said. "And an operation?"

"Of course I did. Another six months and I'd have been walking with a cane. We played up the effects, that's all. We had to, or you wouldn't have signed on."

"That's my next question. Why sign me on? Why invite me in at all?"

"We needed you," Silla said. "Isn't that obvious?"

"But you *didn't*. Every single thing that I did, you could have done for yourselves."

"You think so?" She was smiling, even if it was totally humorless. "Navigated the Cloud, steered clear of the reefs, escaped from the sounder. You think *we* could have done all that? Lou, we couldn't have done *any* of it. You know the fatality rates for rakehell and harvester crews. It's horrendous. Call what you have skill, call it instinct, call it luck, call it anything you like. But whatever you call it, don't call it common. One in ten billion has it. We needed Lucky Lou Worden."

She was talking to me slowly and carefully, as though I was a total idiot. The worst part was that I was beginning to believe it.

"But," I said slowly, "once you knew who had the starfire, you must have thought you were home free. Why didn't you kill me when you had the chance?"

Tish's fat face took on a curiously prissy expression. "We don't work that way," he said. "Silla and I don't kill people."

As he was speaking, I went across to Silla and examined her wrists. She had been quietly working at the ends of the tape with her nails, and she had freed her left hand.

"Sorry," I said. "Can't have that, you know. Why did you bother? You couldn't get away even if you got loose."

"Habit," Silla smiled up at me. "You're not too bright, are you, Lou?" There was no malice in her voice.

"Maybe I'm not." I re-taped her hands. "But I'm not the one who's tied up."

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"There!" Tish couldn't move much, but he shrugged his shoulders to show his exasperation. "That's what I mean. *That's* what we can't compete with! How did you know what Silla was doing? How did you know to go straight to her *left* hand?"

"I don't know. I just knew." I went to sit in the pilot's chair, where I could keep an eye on them. "Keep quiet, now, both of you. I have to think."

Assuming that I knew how to think. Tish and Silla would argue that I did not. There was a natural symmetry to the situation. Tish and Silla believed that they could not do what I had done. I was absolutely sure that I could never do what *they* had done. Whatever I am, I'm not patient. I'm also—Silla was persuasive—not too bright. I can act and I can react, but I can't make long-term plans. Setting up a scam to exploit the Cloud, an enterprise months or years in the making, was utterly beyond me.

There would have been more to this operation, even though Tish and Silla were not telling. We had hardly touched the Cloud's potential. They would never be satisfied with a single starfire. What about the harvesters, and the cargoes of transuranics? What about the *shwartzgeld?* And now we had the new mystery of the sounders, and their relation to the starfires. I would never solve that, but Tish and Silla might. They had somehow turned off the drive of the *Merry Monk* while the rakehell was in full flight, otherwise we would not have been able to rendezvous. Lissomer in a data egg wouldn't do the trick. I didn't know anything that *would.*

Did Tish and Silla also have Sol-side contacts to sell a starfire?

Probably; but I doubted if it mattered much. They didn't get their kicks from financial gain. I finally recognized the look in Silla's eyes, that first night we had been together. She was as much a danger freak as I was.

"For what it's worth," I said. "I don't kill people, either."

I went across and freed them, first Tish and then Silla.

"We're incomplete entities," I went on. "I don't have your brains and planning ability, you don't have my luck or my nose for danger. Put us together in the Cloud for a while, we might do something special. I think we have to talk."

It was safe enough to let them go. If they tried anything, it wouldn't work. Better yet, even if it *might* have worked, they were convinced that it wouldn't.

Maybe in the Klondike Gold Rush the big winners were the shopkeepers, people like Arthur Harper and Jack McQuesten; maybe they were the famous prospectors like Clarence Berry, who made their strikes and swaggered around San Francisco in their furs and gold jewelry.

But maybe the biggest winners had never made it into the history books at all.

Tish and Silla and I weren't successful, not yet. I had heard of them and they had heard of me. We were too well known. Really successful operators don't become famous. ●

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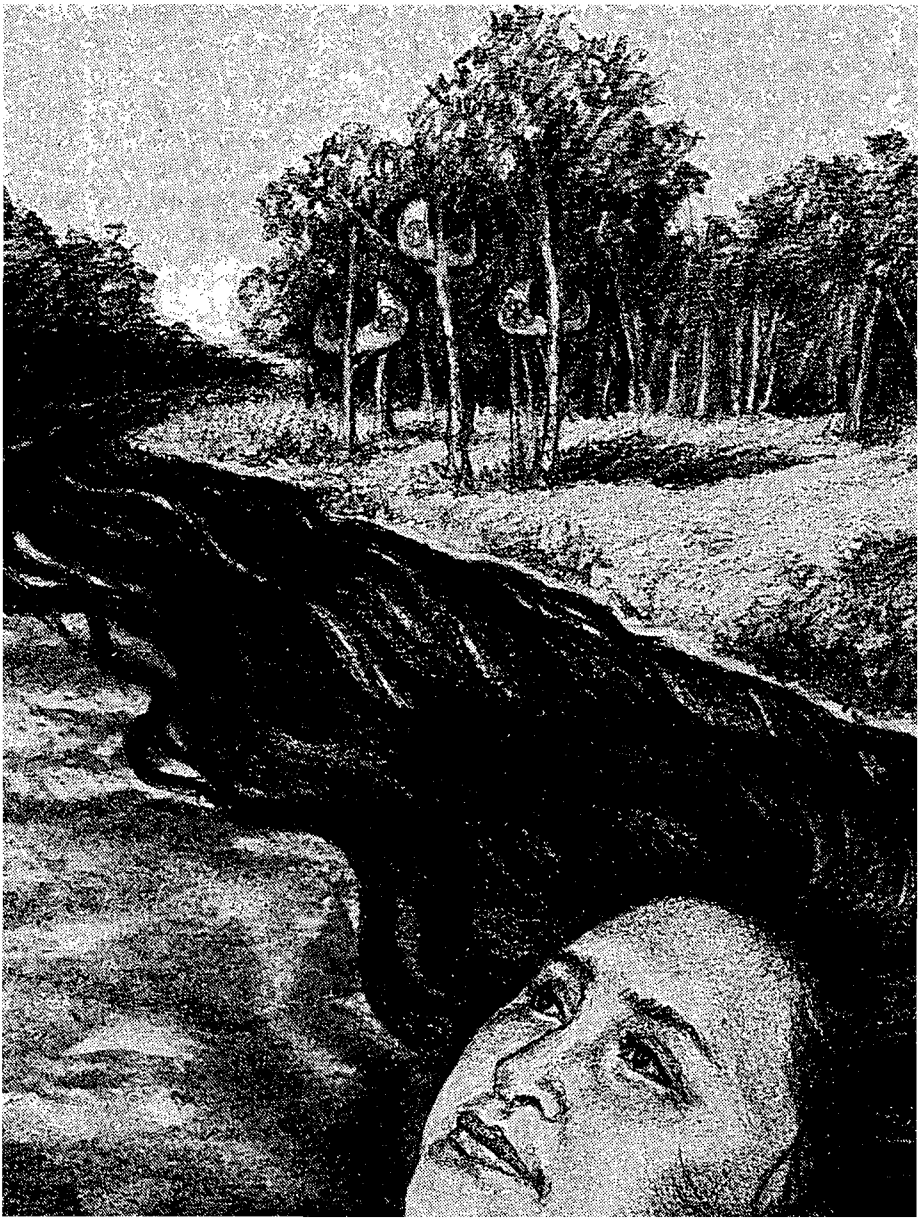

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One culture's indifference to another is poignantly depicted in Jessica Amanda Salmonson's haunting tale of . . .

GHOUL JOHN AND THE CORPSE

Jessica Amanda Salmonson

Illustration by Laurie Harden

There was a white ghoul who traveled along the Columbia River in the 1830s. His name was John. There were by then increasing numbers of white ghouls, but John was famous even among ghouls. White ghouls called themselves "relic hunters." The people stood guard by their burial grounds, which in past ages, when there were no white ghouls, required no guards.

One day white ghouls came to Memaloose Island, the place of the thirteen sacred death-lodges. Men and women ghouls piled out of their excursion boat, wearing fine garments and hats and carrying picnic baskets. They chittered among themselves gaily. The men strutted in high boots. The women swung parasols and stepped daintily. They were such happy ghouls.

Their plan was to eat the food they had brought along, and, when their baskets were empty, they would refill them with the flathead skulls of babies. But the people were ready for them this time. They fired a volley of balls over the heads of the white ghouls, who ran back to their boats in a hurry-scurry. The lady ghouls complained most of all, because their picnic and relic-hunting excursion was spoiled by savages.

Had Ghoul John been with them that day, it would have been harder to frighten them away. He was a tricky ghoul. Everyone knew about him. The people watched his every move. He was a lazy ghoul and hated to use a paddle, so he asked among the people for assistance, hiring two big men

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to paddle him about in a canoe. These two men were able to keep a particularly close watch on Ghoul John's activities, so the people could rest a little easier until he was gone.

It was Ghoul John's method to ride a big ship up and down the Columbia River. At various creeks and estuaries, he would tell his hired people to take him upstream by canoe, claiming he only wanted to look at burial places. "I would never do anything offensive," he promised the people. "Would I risk the good will of the people?" But to his fellow ghouls, he said, "For my own part, I would be willing to take any risk to procure those skulls. But I am restraining myself on account of the ship and crew, who might suffer from prejudice if my sacrilege were discovered."

Wherever he landed, about twenty of the people would show up, pretending to do this or that, surreptitiously keeping watch. On one burial island, Ghoul John walked around with his fingers twitching. Spittle frothed at the corners of his mouth, so eager was he to desecrate the graves. He felt deprived, because he was so closely watched, and the people could see how greatly Ghoul John suffered.

When Ghoul John finally got in the canoe and was taken back to the ship, an old woman of the people came forth to the burial ground. She was a woman of great medicine. She walked about the graves, waving her wand over the bones, purifying ground Ghoul John's feet had polluted, cleansing the air where Ghoul John breathed. Standing on the ship, Ghoul John watched the purification rites with an attitude of weird delight.

Ghoul John went downriver to White Ghouls' Settlement on Wapato Island. The ghouls called the settlement Fort William, established by a shipmaster whose name was Nathaniel Wyeth. This island, some fifteen miles in length with its own lakes and streams, had always belonged to the people. In an out-of-the-way place along a certain stream, there was Chinook holy ground, which remained in active use as a place for the dead.

Ghoul John insisted he must see the holy ground. He was taken up the stream by the hired people. "How thrilling!" said Ghoul John, clapping together his pallid hands. When his hired people gazed at him, he found them worrisomely inscrutable, so he tried to disguise his excitement with a more respectful demeanor. His guides restrained him from getting out of the canoe, telling him not to disturb the ghosts. As he had no other ghouls with him, he was pliant.

From the canoe in which he knelt, he could see, about a hundred feet away from the stream's bank, a stand of sacred trees in which canoes were mounted high in branches. Each canoe had a smaller canoe laid atop it, upside down, forming a lid. How Ghoul John hungered to lift up the lids! He said to himself, "I must return here in secret this very night! I must have what's in those coffins!"

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At midnight, the ghoul went out from the fort and climbed in a little canoe by himself. He paddled along the island, close to the bank, until he came to the creek, and paddled up that. Soon he came to the stand of trees that had so captivated him. He ran his canoe into the shallows. The canoe could not reach the beach, so Ghoul John took off his shoes and socks and waded to the bank.

He approached the coffin-tree.

His heart was beating wildly. He had a feeling of excitement in his groin as he climbed into the tree and lifted the canoe-lid. His grinning face shone in the moonlight. He was deliriously happy. "Oh! Oh!" exclaimed Ghoul John. Laid out in the canoe was a young woman, wrapped in very fine blankets, who had died two or three years earlier. The oils of the cedar-wood had preserved the woman's body. She was dried out and stiffened, but showed no sign of decay. "Oh!" exclaimed Ghoul John. "A perfect mummy! I must have her!"

Most white ghouls beheaded corpses for the flathead skulls. It was not uncommon for the people to find a desecrated place, where all their dead relations were beheaded. But Ghoul John was overcome with love for the dead woman. He wanted to take her away with him in her entirety, to possess her intact. So he tied a rope around her and lowered her to the ground. He replaced the canoe-lid so that his deed might pass undetected. Climbing out of the tree, he strapped the dead woman to his back, and with leaps of joy hobbled barefooted through the shallows to his boat.

Now Ghoul John fretted that the two large people he had hired would discover what he had done. If they found the woman's corpse, they would surely take her away from him. So he took her into the fort and hid her in the storehouse of one of the white ghouls whose name was Walker. He told Walker, "I deposited my prize in your storehouse. I have sewed around her a large Indian mat, so she looks like a bale of guns." Ghoul Walker agreed that this was terribly clever.

Because the people were aware of Ghoul John's perversion, he knew it was not safe to take the mummy with him when he left the following day for Fort Vancouver. He instructed Walker to send him the mummy on the next schooner. Walker was agreeable to these matters, and said he would be happy to commit such a crime on behalf of his good friend Ghoul John.

Several days later, Ghoul John hurried down to the river to meet the schooner newly anchored off Fort Vancouver. He pranced along the river's edge, clasping his fingers as he sang, "Where's my mummy? Where, oh where's my pretty mummy?" But to his distress, there was no mummy on board. Instead, the captain handed him a letter from the ghoul called Walker. From this letter Ghoul John learned the reason for his disappointment.

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The dead woman's brother, Lean Elk, lived at Cascade Rapids, near the place where the Old Ones made paintings and carvings on the faces of the rocks. On the night his sister's grave was robbed, Lean Elk suddenly awoke in his lodge. Standing at the foot of his bedding was a four-inch replica of his sister. Her soul had entered the lodge without waking anyone but Lean Elk. He sat up amidst warm furs and observed that the miniature of his sister shone like a star. She looked extremely sad. Before Lean Elk could address her, she popped out of existence, like a bubble on the river.

Early that morning, Lean Elk set off down the river for Wapato Island. He paddled up the creek to inspect his sister's canoe. He came to the coffin-tree and saw that her canoe had been shifted. He visited her often, to bring her small gifts, to sing to her spirit, to speak to her of the things that were going on in their family, or to boast of his luck fishing, just as he had done when she lived. Being so greatly familiar with her resting place, even a slight change could not pass his eyes unobserved. With a sinking suspicion in the pit of his bowels, he climbed up and looked under the lid.

Although he remained outwardly calm, in his heart he was in a panic. He came down from the tree and looked more closely at the thief's footprints. They did not turn inward like people, but turned outward like white ghouls. He knew at once this was the work of Ghoul John. He went to the fort and set his case before the one called Walker. At first Walker tried to brush the matter off, but Lean Elk would not listen to lies. He looked right into the pale eyes of the ghoul when he said, "The people watched Ghoul John leave, and he had no opportunity to take my sister away from this fort. Please, where have you hidden my sister?"

It is surprising to note, but there are occasional white ghouls who experience pangs of guilt, especially when looking into the eyes of one of the people. By and large, ghouls are a pack of liars, who bunch together with a common lie which becomes for them the truth. Walker might easily have stuck to his lie, but looking into the dark eyes of a man, even a ghoul can be awakened to humanity. Sorry for his assistance to Ghoul John, and fearful that the people might be sufficiently outraged to kill some ghouls, Walker not only returned the mummy to Lean Elk, but gave him, as well, nice blankets in apology.

Then Walker sent the letter to Ghoul John. He wrote, in part, "The poor Indian took the body of his sister upon his shoulders, and as he walked away, grief got the better of his stoicism. The sound of his weeping was heard long after he had entered the forest." And even today, if you listen, if you are sensitive of heart, you will hear, in the wooded places around Sauvie Island and along the banks of the Columbia, the sound of Lean Elk weeping. ●

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R. Neube

SON OF THE ROAD

R. Neube lives in Covington, Kentucky, with his wife Lorraine Kaiser. His short fiction has received a Kentucky Arts Council grant and a $3,000 award from the University of Barcelona. His macabre chronicle of a future "Son of the Road" is his first tale for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by John Stevens

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It was Saturday night, so he parked in the rear of the Clark Clinic. In a real burg, he would have had to bribe a security guard. However, Doc Antonov ran a one-woman clinic, and she was grateful for the company.

A warm midnight breeze held the threat of an August storm. They sat in front of the clinic on lawn chairs, sipping Norwegian Blue, a tea cultured from vats of modified E. coli in Oslo's warehouse district.

"But I do have a life." The doctor's voice sounded as grey as her eyes and hair, though she was scarcely thirty. "Just not on Crazy Night. Why *should* I go out? My beeper will just drag me back here. So, I might as well stay."

Roger Lansing chewed his mustache, leaning back in his chair. "How do you make ends meet out here? There can't be enough patient traffic to pay you."

"The local business community subsidizes some of the clinic's expenses. And sometimes a Crazy Night will pay for a month all by its lonesome."

"Any DOA's?"

"By the book, Lansing! If I catch you ghouling any of my patients, dead *or* alive, I'll make a call. There's an instant form of justice up here. Have you signed *your* license's organ donation line?"

"I have Pryor Syndrome. Even terminal cases wouldn't take my organs." His green eyes squinted.

"What about Paxton Antibodies? Considering your vocation, you should have the money for the treatment."

"When it cost $200K, I almost had enough saved. Then those Texan Separatists blew up the Paxton plant. The price tripled, and I was screwed. Isn't it peculiar how the price never went *down* after they built *three* plants? I'm seventy next December, and I'm on my third set of lungs. Barring a miracle, I'm not going to swing those antibodies."

Her grey eyes sparkled as she hoisted her mug of tepid tea. "I could tell you were rejuved, but I wouldn't have guessed a day over fifty. Whose do you use?"

"Wuerth. That was eighteen years ago. Of course, if I can't get the Paxtons, I won't rejuv again. What's the point?"

An old truck limped into the lot, one wheel wobbling madly. The roads of Appalachia were often more hole than asphalt.

"An entire family," chuckled Roger.

The doctor turned on the floodlight over the first bay of the converted service station. They thumped right to the open door. Roger kept out of the way, listening intently. Once he heard "listeria" come from the doctor's too-wide mouth, he marked the victim off his list. By the time the Big L knocked you down, it was suffused throughout your body.

He shrugged, and strolled to his hovercraft. Firing up the coffee maker, he emptied an assortment of cookies onto a plate. Genuine coffee was extravagant, but you couldn't bait a hook with peanuts. While Roger wait-

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ed, he slipped into the cockpit and watched a few minutes of bidding on the Med Channel. An outbreak of E. Pryor in Atlanta had their hospitals offering top dollar for lungs.

Just seeing the name of the bacteria made his chest ache. He could almost feel them eating him. Roger forced himself to laugh at the Reaper.

It wasn't fair, it just was.

Bearing his tray of treats, Roger returned to the service station. The patient was inside a sterile bubble, circled by the family. Donning his mournful look, he circulated.

Betty and Luke Boyle farmed an old family holler. Tobacco had supported his grandparents; marijuana, his parents. Coal mining had supported her clan for four generations. The twenty-first century had made all that obsolete. If the state of Kentucky hadn't gone bankrupt and its government been bought at auction by Gibbon, Inc., their farm would have been seized for nonpayment of taxes. Fortunately, the folks at Gibbon could care less about a chump-change dirt farm.

Two of the kids, both teens, grubby and sexless in their Doulle suits, were hers; the listeria victim and the eldest boy, a brainless-looking chap, were his. The child wandering around aimlessly was theirs.

The final one was a teen fem in body paint and a simple sundress. She had restless brown eyes that spoke of counting the *days* in foster care until she would be *gone*. When she walked out of the lasering, he followed.

"If you had ID saying you were eighteen, I could buy one of your lungs for thirty thousand dollars. What would you do with that much money?"

Her gaunt face beamed. "What kind of ID?"

"I heard you can buy bogus Citizen's cards for one hundred dollars at Jubal's. Amazing, even a burg of six hundred fifty like Victoria has its own full-time forger."

"A hunnerd dollars?" Her eyes grew misty. "What kind of sex is worth that much? To you, I mean."

"When I was a boy, a meal at McDonald's cost a C-note. Funny how money fluctuates. Answer my question first."

"I'd move to a city, any city. I'm a great mechanic, a decent cook, and . . . I'd like to find a corporate family and buy me a share. *They* only want me because they get a check every month. I'll buy into a family *I* choose, not the state!"

Roger dropped the Franklin at her feet. "I'm going to be here another week. I shouldn't be hard to find."

He slipped back to the clinic, encountering Luke puking in the bushes. Despite their cost, Roger pulled his cigarette case and offered the rail-thin farmer a choice of cigarettes, joints, and keffers. The farmer took a cigarette. As befitted a consummate buyer, Roger joined him in smoking.

The farmer seemed grateful for the small talk, quickly ranging from the Reds of baseball to the Greens of Washington to the crimson of the

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Pentagon's latest foreign adventure. Eventually, Roger warped the conversation around to business.

"It isn't right, if you ask me," Roger said. "Foreign tobacco and foreign pot, and those Californians inventing kef. Fusion killing coal. The law made you plant forests, then they invented mahogae and made timber obsolete."

"Ain't fair. Crime is the only business War-shington leaves for us."

"Well, our generation was the lucky one. I feel sorry for the kids. We could get loans to go to college and better ourselves. The kids don't have that option."

"My bud Jake's Elissa took the GE tests, hoping for a scholarship. All the winners came from the cities."

Roger nodded. "I hear you. My clan comes from Stanton County. You can't believe the shit I've had to swallow working in the cities."

"Those Urbans will find out one day they need us. *But,* we don't need *them!* We can only get so poor. We've nothing left to lose!"

"They have the money. That makes them think they're Greek gods."

"They have the jobs and the government trough. All *we* have are these brooding hills. Best we can hope is to stay out of the Revenuers' way."

"That's why I work for myself." Roger pulled a card from his faded jeans. "I see to it that city bucks go to people who can use them."

"A ghoul, eh?" Luke turned the card over and over with dirty, scarred fingers. "So that's why you're hanging 'round Doc An."

"I'm not after your boy. I'm not the kind of scum who steals organs. I deal straight, cards on the table."

"Ole Doc Kimball over in Mason County got caught stealing organs, and got himself shot. What kind of education you got, Mister Ghoul?"

"I'm a college dropout. Guess I was too busy partying to learn much. I can't work for the corporations, they *expect* you to cheat people. I can't do that. You have to live with yourself, whatever you do."

"Never could stand to work for anybody. I have a bachelors in history and a masters in geology. Don't ask, it's a long story. Worked three jobs to put myself through the university. I thought it was supposed to end up different. Is making a living too much to ask?"

"You know, Gibbon is trying to raise every dollar it can. They're selling homestead tax exemptions. You could protect your farm for the rest of your life for—"

"Only twenty-five thousand dollars. Are you going to tell me I could cough up a lung and get twenty-five grand?"

"A lung is worth thirty. A kidney will get you ten. While I'm taking those, I could juice your glands for another two. Extracts are all the fad in Japan these days. What would $42K do for your family? It wouldn't change your life, but . . ."

Roger offered another smoke, which the farmer took. The hook was

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dangled as well as it could be. Overselling was a trait for tyros. You never pressed. The twenty-first century did that for you.

He walked away, returning to the clinic in time to see the doctor bagging her patient. The listeria, still struggling to find its niche as a human parasite, had failed and killed its host.

Life was a struggle. It wasn't fair, it just was.

TB-3, listeria, even smallpox had sprung from their graves to haunt these hills. A million ways existed for a poor person to die. With rejuv and extracts and replacement organs, the rich had a million opportunities to live.

Betty Boyle was wheezing like a defective steam engine. Roger took her arm and guided her to the truck.

"It's so sad," he muttered. His brain raced, feeling the desperation, knowing that he could have both of her lungs and her broken heart for the asking. The classes he'd been forced to attend at sales school had explored the state of bereavement in depth. Easy meat, the bereaved were called.

She leaned against the fender and cried. Much to his own surprise, Roger left her there, turned, and walked back to his hover.

A million-dollar hovercraft, he mused. Pity the bank owned so much of it. He settled into the cockpit, turning on the tube to distract himself. Organ desires of an entire continent scrolled up the screen.

"It could be worse, bucko," he told himself. "The Euros are dissecting criminals. Won't be long before they're doing it here. All those warm organs for free. You've got to get the bucks while they're here to *get*."

"Winners never quit," roared the memory of his mother, her face twisted in a junkie rictus. Half an hour later, she hit a bank. Her hero was Jesse James, and, like him, she was shot from behind by a member of her own gang. Nine years old, Roger saw her face on the TV. Her death rictus was the same as the one she wore in life.

Roger had lived in a sewer for three weeks, until he was popped by the cops and turned over to Youth Services. It wasn't until he was twenty-one and the Arlington Scandal broke that he learned that one out of every five fosters of that era had vanished into the Perv Conspiracy. He'd been one of the fortunate ones—a warm bed, only an occasional beating, and the joy of a forty-hour work week at a factory manufacturing bushings.

What had the Nazis hung over the gates of their concentration camps? Freedom through work?

The screen and the microwave beeped at the same time. His masterputer flashed the bulletin from the White House. Though President Lewis was officially missing, the Vice Prez, Speaker of the House, Sec of State, Chief Justice, and a bevy of other nabobs were holding a press con-

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ference to declare that *none* of them would assume the presidential mantle unless Congress backed down from its confrontation du jour. Roger couldn't recall which crisis it was that the gov had decided to wallow in this time.

Fortunately, a dentist in Maryland was willing to lead the nation.

"Knock, knock," shouted Doctor Antonov as she climbed into the hover.

"Did I forget to lock the hatch again?"

"*My God!* It's a palace!"

"I was lucky with this puppy. Bought it from the estate of a lynched lawyer in Louisville."

"What's this?" She waved at the ream of hardcopy sitting on the rim of the cockpit.

"Jackpot sequences. I keep a copy in front of me to remind myself I could get lucky."

"Jackpot?"

"If memory serves, I have 128 on file. Jackpots are the final refuge of the wealthy. A match on 375 of the 450 sequences is as good as you usually get without a twin or the mythical clone. Transplants require all those immune suppressants. That can be bad news."

"They say the Euros have clone farms for their elite."

"Some folks say Elvis was the Messiah. *Any*way, a Jackpot donor matches 430-440 sequences." It took him a second to come up with an appropriate lie. "There are folks out there who will pay millions for their match."

"Why? Do they keep the donors in velvet cages until they need an organ?"

"Something like that."

Find a match, and you had a fortune. Of course, there was the little matter of kidnapping and accessory to the Jackpot's eventual murder. A total transplant makeover could extend a life by sixty years.

Roger had once met a Jackpotter. She couldn't smile wide enough. Which Ghoul Convention had it been—'27, '31? On the shoulders of ghouls, she'd been paraded around the con for the better part of an hour. The FBI arrived the next morning, but she was flying to Japan by then, to live the good, nay, the *great* life!

It was the stuff of legend. Every ghoul could dream.

Roger swallowed the lump in his throat, half-hoping he'd never have the opportunity; he was too afraid that he knew what he would do if he had.

"Want to split a pizza?"

"Absol! There isn't a restaurant in the county. That's the problem with a barter economy—plays hell with the service sector."

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"Eighteenth century poverty in the twenty-first century. Victoria is as bad as I've seen it, and I worked the inner-city beat for eight years. I had to turn down a client the other day because he was in advanced starvation."

"That doesn't happen as often as the natives brag. They take a perverse delight in their putative famine."

"Gotta be proud of *some*thing," he grumbled, removing the pizza from the microwave and dumping it on the fold-down table before waving for the doc to take a seat.

"The real sin was the loss of the schools. If the young don't die—and believe me, they *do*—they either migrate to the cities or stay ignorant. One vicious cycle atop another."

They chewed the pizza in silence.

The doctor opened the fridge and pulled out a tin of cola. "Do you mind?"

He nodded, leaving the rest for her, though he'd had only two slices. The food sat like a brick in his belly. Even inside the air-conditioned shell, Roger wilted.

Once sated, she leaned back in the net-chair, deflating with a long sigh. "I was warned about you. The State Medical Officer inspected me last month. She'd heard you were in the area. Why do they call you Nail?"

"I nail down contracts. You're looking at the only independent who has never been busted. Nowadays, I prefer Ibn Turgi as my moniker—son of the road. My late wife gave me that one. She never adapted to the nomadic lifestyle."

"I can sympathize. The Board moves me every year. Being a perpetual stranger adds to the punishment. I've only got four more years on my sentence."

"Drugs or fraud?"

"Every doctor in my building was padding their MedCare billing. I wouldn't have, but I had a little gambling problem and . . . why am I telling you this?"

"Because SMO Gilbert told you I was the scum of the earth?"

"You know Gilbert?"

"Our paths have crossed. Did she tell you how I once got myself checked into the suicide ward at Saint Seymour's and harvested thirty-nine organs in one weekend? Did she mention that not *one* of my clients offed themselves later? Money and purpose, that's all a person needs. It worked far better than the meds and psychobabble the staff were ladling out."

"She said you ghouled your own wife."

"Guilty as charged. Better me than having a coroner or an undertaker or some thieving orderly ghouling her."

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"It must have been tough. I couldn't do *that*. How long were you married?"

"A few months shy of thirty-two years." The pizza boiled in his stomach.

Grey eyes slitted. "What kind of communications gear are you carrying? ATT? Nissan? BP?" Her voice quivered as she spoke the last two.

Roger stretched out on the couch, trying not to smile. "I have a Turner. Overpriced to be sure, but I didn't pay for it. Need to make a call? Does ATT have a lockout on your voice?"

"Part of my sentence, I'm afraid. They took my bank and credit cards, too. If I could make a call. . . ?" She removed a folded racing form from her pocket. "Do you ever . . . bet?"

"I don't have the luck to gamble."

"If you could lend me your phone and a little credit, I'll bet my kidney." Hands a-trembling, she gnawed her lower lip.

"A *little* gambling problem? Are you absolutely certain?"

"I knew if I dangled an organ you'd see it my way."

"There's the little matter of a contract and a probe. Would you prefer to sleep on it?"

"I haven't placed a bet in years. If I was *that* addicted, wouldn't I have run a few wagers through Jubal's?"

"Your kidney is worth ten K. That's a lot to ride on the back of a thoroughbred."

"I've followed this filly from her first race. Kane's Favorite Fun is a natural."

"Why do you need credit? Even busted, they pay you folks fairly well."

"Last month's check from the Health Service bounced. I've had to buy all the Clinic's supplies out of my own savings. The locals are tapped out. The Clinic over in Owsley County closed its door. I'm not going to do that, but I can't run my clinic on pennies. I *know* what I'm doing!"

"It's your kidney, Doc."

He rose and fetched his chipplate, hitting keys to adapt the standard contract. She thumbed the sensor pad and sealed the deal. Where was his Uniprobe? He abandoned the search and fetched his backup. The probe bit her arm. Whereupon, he stepped to his communications console and fed his access code into its computer.

"Just charge it to my number. I could have gotten your kidney for eight K, couldn't I?"

"You're not a cheat, Nail."

"No, I'm a ghoul."

He didn't recall falling asleep. The couch left kinks in his back. The morning passed in a blur, too much of it spent in front of the screen, watching lung futures gyrate on the Chicago Commodity Exchange. The Med Corporations joined the buying frenzy on the news that Congress

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was removing transplants from MedCare coverage. Replacing the slow-paying bureaucracy with new cash-and-carry rules spelled bonanza.

Roger fought the urge to drive his cargo directly to Atlanta. However, six lungs weren't enough. Would the market stay hot? A few more days, and the myriad hooks he'd dangled would bring in a rich harvest. Granted, he could go and return within forty-eight hours.

"No, you can't allow them to mull it over too long. They'll decide it's less painful to buy another lottery ticket. No, Lansing ole boy, you *have* to gamble that the panic will last long enough for you to fill your freezer."

The decision gnawed at him, but he swallowed his doubts and drove into town. Half the houses along the way were abandoned, many being slowly dismantled for firewood, their plumbing and doors and windows having long since been looted. The natives sat on their porches, staring at him as he passed with hungry eyes.

Six lungs. It stirred memories of the early days, when ghouling was merely signing up fresh meat who went to the hospital for the procedure. The hospitals had raked in the cream; ghouls were merely agents collecting their tithe.

Forty-one years ago. A lifetime ago, Roger could have harvested six lungs in an afternoon during those halcyon ghetto/barrio days. He sighed, overdosed on nostalgia until his dusty brain cells disgorged the negative memories. One Friday, he'd harvested five lungs and thirty kidneys. He'd taken Lydia for a weekend at the Hyatt, champagne and room service. The bank account empty, he tooled into work Monday morning to discover that disease and the police (Running their ID through CitizenBase had uncovered three felons, who were arrested at the hospital) had eliminated all but a single kidney.

There *were no* good old days.

He scooted into the empty lot next to Jubal's. The "Entertainment Center" offered drinking, pool, and sports TV downstairs, and a wider array of less legal pleasures upstairs.

A smoldering truck marked the excesses of a party monster. A body bag was laying beneath the ornate wrought iron mailbox. Roger got out and gandered. Of course, it was one of his hot prospects, rendered worthless for anything more than pet food.

"The Law of Infinite Perversity strikes again. No big deal, he was just a kidney. Pity I wasn't around to get the goodies while they were fresh."

A shaved-head decorated with vomit lurched over to Roger, leaning against the hover with a stricken posture. "I've been waiting fer ya."

"Give me your arm." Roger grabbed it for a quick poke of his Uniprobe. There was an aura of illness about the man, though it could be nothing more than his lack of bathing, freshly broken nose, and toxic breath.

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"Cash, right?" He rearranged the grime on his face with hands fouler still. "I have a little problem with child support. The banks'll seize any credit transactions." He coughed flecks of vileness onto the smooth hull of the hovercraft.

"Always cash." Roger didn't care for the feral way his eyes slitted. "Hang on a sec, I need to check my machines."

He closed the hatch, using his remote to activate the hover's sensory array. The donor was fingering a butcher knife. On the way to the back, he rummaged through kitchenette drawers until he found a rusty pistol, which went into his pocket.

Inserting the probe's sample into the Glaxo Spectrum, he waited. The black box beeped, numbers flashed—all low but within tolerance. He banged the send key to file the report with the hover's masterputer.

If he hadn't needed the lung, he would have locked the hatch and told him to sod off. Instead, he waved the donor inside. A subtle hook of the thumb, a less than subtle hefting of the gun. The donor eyed the revolver and lost confidence.

Roger stretched the donor on a slab after he'd made him remove his soiled shirt. The Braun spider clambered out of its recess as soon as Roger pushed the big yellow button. The button blinked LUNG until he pressed it again. The kind folks at Braun assumed ghouls were morons.

Indeed, there were times he wished he *were* a moron.

The procedure took precisely nine minutes. Tentacles from the spider swept through the incision it made. Electromag pulses and sprays of painkillers, coagulants, and antibiotics infused the channel made by the laser. The tentacles gently deflated the lung, sliced, sealed, folded, and extracted the organ. Before the spider moved off, it glued a patch over the cauterized incision.

All Roger had to do was slap morphine and antibiotic derms on the man's neck. The former wasn't necessary, but he included one for all his druggie customers. Amazing how rapidly the news of a free buzz circulated.

After making certain that the spider inserted the lung into a container full of protective ooze, he retired to the cockpit. The Med Channel continued its coverage of the Chicago Exchange. October lungs were up 21 to 57.5, with no ceiling in sight.

Would the organ rush still be gold tomorrow? Doubts flopped his stomach.

A Senator appeared on the screen, berating the public for shackling their servants with the balanced budget amendment. They *wanted* to serve, but they were helpless!

Roger counted the three 10K notes over and over, watching the Senator's hologram face shimmer and smile. The plastisteel sheets were as heavy as lead. Doper specials, they'd been called when the Treasury issued them.

An hour passed before he fetched the donor. Roger forked over the money and then helped him stumble to his car. The donor was conscious,

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but not exactly coherent. He drove off surprisingly well, though, being practiced at the murderous art of drunk driving.

The summer heat built as he leaned against his hover; its humidity trapped the grime and held it close to the ground. Tina sashayed from the front of Jubal's, a card in hand. Under the harsh sun, she appeared so damnably young. Her mane of blue hair was brushed and demure. She adjusted her tie, the only opaque shred of her garb.

Pity, he thought, she had the emaciated look prized by the late twentieth century, but forty years late. There was no meat there, just bones and angles. Potential lovers no doubt edged away from her, fearing that her emaciated frame hinted at disease.

And she'd never understand why.

"I'm eighteen, nice and legal," she declared. "Where do I sign?"

"Come in, Citizen Boyle." He inspected the card, impressed by its quality. "I mean, Citizen Miller." He held his breath as the card zipped through the reader. The data bounced to SouthNet, then to Washington. It came back clean.

Damn good ID.

He raked the Uniprobe down her arm, then stuck it into the Glaxo. It mulled over the sample of flesh and blood before beeping. The numbers were good.

"I'm pregnant, four months. What's the going price?"

"That market is maxed. I can do you a favor and give you a thou, *if* you're going to cough up a lung, too."

"Will *they* find out? The Greyhound only comes through town every other week. If *they* find out, they'll beat my money outta me."

"Nobody has to know a thing, unless *you* tell them. Nobody saw you get in, and I'll drop you off outside town once we're through. When's the bus due?"

"A week next Tuesday. *But,* I'm no rube. I want my money up front. You can't cheat *me!*"

"C'mon, give me a break. I don't cheat folks. Thirty for the lung, one for the fetus, and I can take your kidney for another ten. Your hormone levels are screwed, so I can't juice those. Tell you what. I'll be driving down to Atlanta Monday. You meet me here at noon Monday, and I'll give you a ride. No strings attached."

"You just want to fuck me." Arms akimbo, she struck a pose, turning just so to show off her cheek bones. Tina smacked her thin lips.

"That's 41K for the whole package. *You* pick and choose what you want to sell. I don't haggle. If you don't like my game, you're welcome to wait for the next ghoul."

He walked into the kitchenette, pouring a cup of Icelandic pine tea with shaking hands. Why did people treat him like a criminal?

Tina sidled into the kitchenette, slipping out of her gauzy and draping

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it over the table. She turned slowly on tiptoes. Scars latticed her back and ass, old and new. More than one was infected. A few had grey rims, a sign listeria was present. Untreated, she'd be dead before winter.

He decided not to tell her. Reaching into the fridge, he removed an eight-hundred-dollar tube of Sagancide. She stepped backward, eyes locked on the knife in the sink.

"Ssssh, I just want to dab this on your open wounds."

"You don't need Vaseline. I'm used to a rough ride. That's what you want, isn't it?" She assumed the position. "What?" she blurted as he used a toothpick to spread the gel over the listeria colonies. "That tickles. Are you real? You promise to get me out of this compost heap?"

"If I say I'll give you a ride, I will. This is biz, not pleasure. *All* I'm interested in are your organs. Lookit, I'm seventy. You'd kill me in bed!"

She sat on the table, slowly crossing her long legs. "Take them all. Give me something to thumb." Her voice crackled like cheap plastic.

Roger held up his chipplate. "It's a standard contract. Read it first. Take your time. Would you like some tea?"

"Read? I only got to the second grade before the schools closed."

He banged the keyboard and handed it to her. A cartoon character explained the contract. The program had been written by a Supreme Court Justice, now retired and explaining the law to the masses. Justice Clain's Broadway musical *Your Rights* was in its 134th boffo week.

Tina forked over the plate, its contract thumbed and sealed. Her crooked grin belied the fear in her eyes. "How badly will it hurt?"

Reassuring babble poured forth as he guided her to the back. He bound her to the polished slab with avuncular care. A derm later, he could have sawed her foot off without her feeling it. This time, he pressed three buttons, then confirmed the work order with three more stabs of his finger. The Braun spider emerged to work its magic.

Roger returned to his tea before having the hover's masterputer upload the completed contracts from the chipplate. The program wed the contracts with the clean codes from the Glaxo before automatically filing copies with the Secretary of Health's office in Washington, as well as the District Office in Nashville.

Everything was automatic in the 21st Cen.

Lung futures continued to advance. The story was eclipsed by Austin declaring the Republic of Texas independent from the Union . . . again. What was wrong with those people?

He packed away the fetus and organs, allowing Tina to slumber. Counting her earnings inspired him to spend a few minutes with his accounting program, logging transactions. Something about balancing numbers always relaxed him.

Roger nodded out and dreamt of his childhood farm. It stood behind the

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factory where he and eleven other fosters lived. The farm was actually an S-shaped patch of wasteland where they planted scraggly gardens. You had to be careful to plant only on the higher slopes. Where water stood during the spring rains, wastes and toxins buried when the district had been a landfill percolated up and poisoned the food.

Late at night, while the others slept, young Roger slipped into the wilderness. When the moon was full, he could watch the mutant bipedal rats as they practiced marching in formation.

He woke with a start. Tina loomed over the cockpit, arms akimbo. "Where's my money? Were you having a nightmare?"

"I keep having dreams about—"

"Where's my money? Were you joshing 'bout that ride to 'Lanta?"

"I leave from this parking lot at noon, not one minute later. *And* don't tell *anyone* about your cash. Not now! Certainly not in Atlanta. People'll gut you like a trout for this kind of green." He handed over the bills.

She stared at their holograms. Her mouth opened and shut and opened. Not a sound emerged.

Roger sighed, envisioning the thousand ways she could be ripped off.

"When we get to Atlanta, I'll take you to a bank, and we'll turn the money into a card. That way, nobody can rob you. Cards are as good as cash," he cozened. A card would only slow the sharks, but he hoped she would wise-up quickly.

You had to hope in this business.

"Nobody will find it!" she averred with the sincerity of youth.

She dressed with casual elegance, humming a discordant tin tune. She left before he had a chance to offer her a ride out of Victoria.

Who saw her? Jubal's was the perfect breeding ground for sharks. He activated the hover's exterior cameras, but they showed no one. The luck of youth.

Roger switched on the tube, watching lung futures climb another three and a half. He watched the numbers scroll up the screen, their formation as crisp as marching rats. Was that a true memory or a whimsy of the dream? It was so hard to remember.

"Are those Texans marching on War-shington yet?" Doctor Antonov limped up the three steps from the hatch. "There's a fine mechanic down the street who can fix your door. All the money you have stashed in here makes it dangerous to have a defective lock. There are lots of *villains* around here." She bumped her head as she swayed in the dusty breeze from the parking lot.

"How'd your horse do?"

"Seventh out of a field of eight. I thought it'd be different this time. I knew this would be the *one*. Like I knew it was the *one* when I wagered my husband's car. What I can't understand is how I became addicted

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when I *never* win! What's *wrong* with me? I wasn't doing it for *me*. I thought that'd change my luck."

"Sometimes the absence of luck is the best luck. My wife found a twenty-dollar bill in the gutter. That's luck. A bus driver dodged a suicide who threw himself in front of the bus. That's luck. Even the bus hitting Lydia was lucky. She didn't suffer. The twenty was still clutched in her hand. Funny, somebody in the hospital stole her wedding ring, but missed that bill. Luck. . . . Life isn't fair, it just *is*."

Roger coughed, grateful that the doctor was too mired in her own 80-proof depression to witness his breathless misery. Her name on his lips still set his heart racing. It pounded so hard his chest ached.

"Hey, Lyd, pick that up."

"Your back broken? Pick it up your own damn self!"

"You're closer." Roger just wanted to see her ass in that new Touliver suit.

The bus careened out of nowhere.

"Let's get this over with, Nail. I have an appendix to remove this afternoon. Just a local, I want to watch your vaunted Brauns work."

Roger couldn't see very well with misted eyes. "Naw, I'm overstocked on kidneys." He watched his hands lift the chipplate and summon her contract. His fingers tapped the delete code. "There, it's gone. Now, get out of my face."

"I don't want your charity!"

It occurred to Roger that today was his anniversary. "Today I've been a ghoul for forty-one years. That's longer than my parents lived. I'm cutting you some slack so I can feel noble for a change. Why spoil it for me?"

"*Hey, Lyd, pick that up.*" The sound of the impact echoed through his memory.

Doctor Tanya Antonov slumped to the floor, where she hugged her knees and slowly rocked. "I thought this one sure-thing couldn't hurt. What's *wrong* with me?"

"You're human?"

She wept quietly as a rainstorm pelted the hover. A gust of wind rocked the craft from side to side. Both the tears and the rain ended as abruptly as they had begun. Silently, the doctor departed.

The Med Channel announced that the Commodity Board had frozen trading in lung futures for the next forty-eight hours. He grinned widely. The price wouldn't fall immediately once the freeze thawed. Already his lung inventory was worth twice as much as it had been when he arrived in Murray County.

The warm glow of the good deed and his blossoming profit filled him with energy. Roger busied himself cleaning and running maintenance on the Brauns.

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"What the deal?"

He examined his backup Uniprobe. It was loaded. He didn't recall taking an unused sample. Puzzled, he plugged it into the Glaxo and dumped its data so he could clean the unit. The sample registered green across the board. Before he could dispatch the data to the masterputer, the phone rang. It was a wrong number.

Roger tooled into Jubal's after making certain the hatch had locked. After hiring an off-duty deputy to watch his back, he bought a round for the house in the bar portion of the "entertainment" complex. A lanky patron promptly celebrated by falling asleep on the floor.

The next six hours saw Roger nailing two lungs, a kidney, and an eye from the steady stream of customers. After a short nap, he recalibrated the chem sensors. (It wouldn't do to have blood alcohol levels above .15 or a narc level of nine, if MedCare checked his records.) Returning to the bar at the stroke of midnight, the hunting was superb among the busted gamblers, the worn-out hookers, and the junkies heeding the call of their veins.

Rejecting every other customer and sending half the others to sober up (you could only calibrate so far), he nevertheless kept his spiders busy until dawn.

Roger was watching the sunrise and sipping Oslo Blue when they came. It didn't take Nostradamus to glean their intent. A bowie knife in the hand of the leader was eloquent. The moonlighting deputy had vanished. Roger dashed inside the hover. He got inside a hair ahead of that slashing blade. Roger's hand slapped the door lever, but it bounced open after its safety bar hit Bowie's outstretched arm.

Where was his pistol?

Bowie charged inside. Roger kicked the robber, a glancing blow off the shoulder. In return, his calf earned a nice little filleting. Bowie threw himself atop him. Roger grabbed the knife as it plunged at his face. Who said steel was cold? The tip inched forward, poised to carve him another nostril.

"Let him have it!" shouted the third thug.

Standing on the bottom step, a short man aimed a heavy semi-auto. Roger heaved Bowie in the way. The report was deafening.

"Oh shit, *Doug!* Ohshitohshitoh*shit!*"

Roger kicked Bowie away, the corpse's dead hand refusing to surrender the huge blade even in death. Thugs two and three had hot-footed into the sunrise.

Securing the hatch, Roger dragged the corpse into the back. The spiders fell on Doug, parting him out before the uniprobe confirmed that he was disease-free. Well, at least of diseases that might blight the merchandise.

Roger summoned another spider and slid to the floor. Its laser, which

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he operated manually, charred his bleeding calf. He wrapped his palm in a towel, frightened that his lack of skill with the laser would do more harm than good. His fingers worked, so he hoped nothing serious had been cut. He contented himself by spraying the wound with coagulants and spectrum antibiotics.

Roger drove to Hudson's Orchard, where he'd rented a shady camping spot. In the isolated apple orchard, the dismembered thug went into five separate holes. It took forever to clean up the interior of his home. A long shower later, he slept as soundly as the dead.

He woke late Sunday evening, just as the moon was peeking above the looming ridge. Someone was pounding on the hatch. Hobbling and chewing on painkillers, he was a bent Nail, every one of his seventy years crackling his joints. A long scan with the exterior cameras convinced him that it was safe. Still, he held his revolver tightly.

It was a wan Luke Boyle.

"I've been thinking about what you said. Are you still interested in a lung?" He kept his eyes on his muddy boots. "I wouldn't want anybody to know. No disrespect, but there's something shameful about selling pieces of yourself."

"I understand. This is totally private." Despite his pain, Roger nailed him. After the Uniprobe showed green and the thumbprint was affixed to the contract, the spider emerged for the farmer's tired lung.

"Is that all there is to it?" He rose off the slab and, after patting the bandage, put on his shirt.

"I try to make it easy," Nail replied, counting the three bills into Boyle's callused palm.

"Reckon I'll be going to the river after all. Didn't expect to feel this good."

"Are the fish biting?"

"Doc An threw herself off the Morehead Road bridge last night. She was good to us. It isn't right to leave her to the catfish. Say, you're looking green around the gills."

"I have a hangover."

After the farmer left, Roger slumped into his cockpit. The suicide twisted his stomach.

"Such a waste," he kept muttering, not certain himself whether he meant the doctor or the kidney he'd refused. Idly, he summoned the results of her uniprobe analysis to the screen. Nothing.

"Oh, that mystery sample in my backup! Wondered whose that was. What did I name that file?"

He searched the directory, but her analysis was still in the Glaxo. He copied the file to the masterputer, cursing himself for not keeping better organized. Its screen began blinking as soon as the codes arrived.

His jaw dropped. The masterputer declared her a Jackpot!

He laughed for the one who'd got away. ●

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dragon skin

the shed skin of dragons
bears certain marks—
scar and scale—
and is slipped
as carefully as history
from head, from hide,
from wing and limb and tail,
so to be lain unblemished,
this part of a dragon's life,
aside.

the shed skin of dragons
seems a dragon shadow,
dark on stony ground
or grass—wherever shed—
and waits the careful eye
of elves for finding,
then to be crafted
into the cloth of faerie,
filigree gossamer silks
with the weight of dream.

do not slip you
into the shed skin of dragons,
do not bind yourself
into the castoff life
or thrust your arms
into the place
where wings were,
nor slip your head
in a dragon's head
do none of this

lest you become trapped
in the shed skin of dragons,
turned dragon now and dragon new
yourself, and shedding
what you carry
of humanity, unbounded
as a beast in new skin,
and skyborn free—turn not
to this, or know that you
will never turn away.

—W. Gregory Stewart

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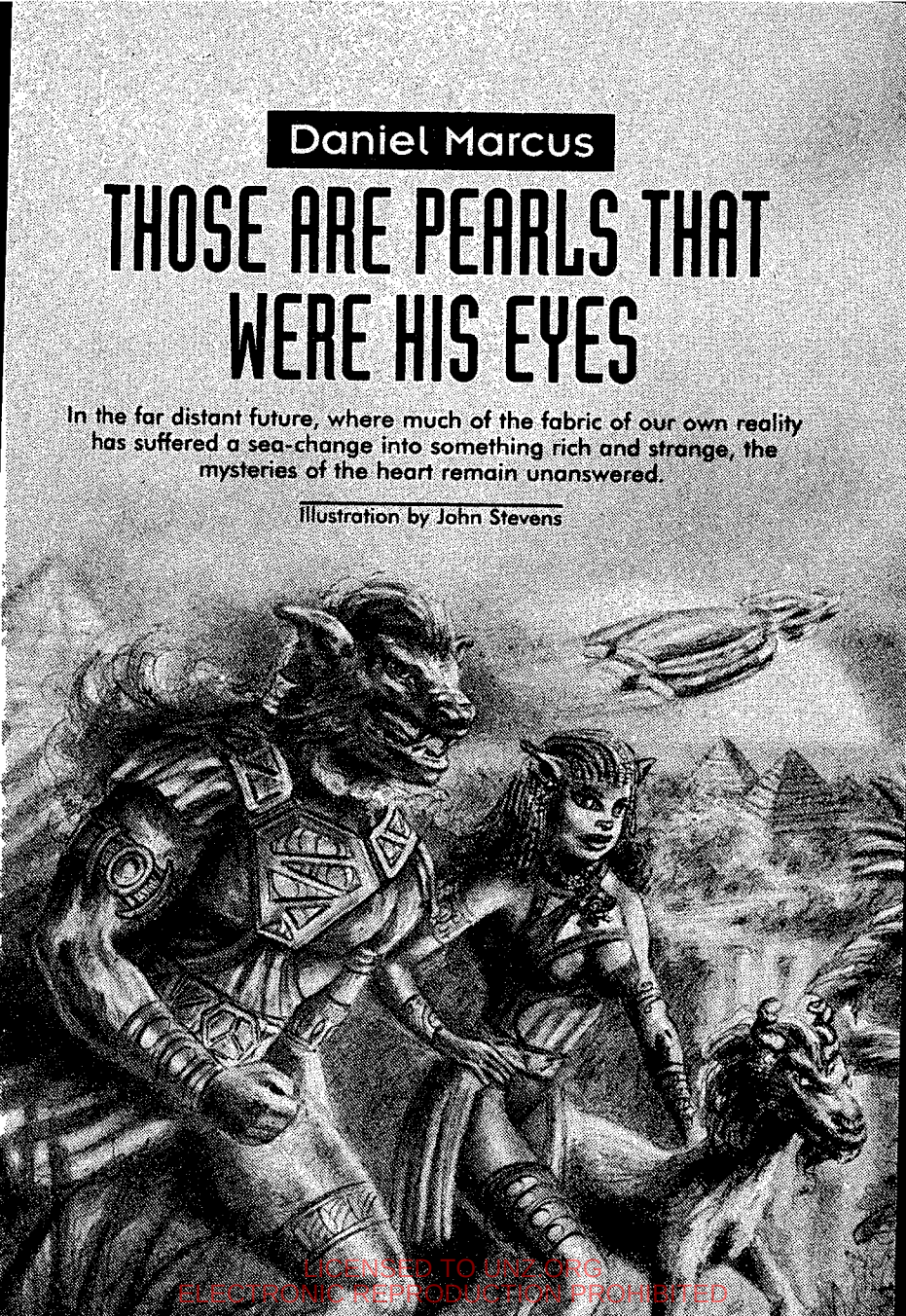
Daniel Marcus

THOSE ARE PEARLS THAT WERE HIS EYES

In the far distant future, where much of the fabric of our own reality has suffered a sea-change into something rich and strange, the mysteries of the heart remain unanswered.

Illustration by John Stevens



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July 1996

The only window in Suki's bedroom opened onto an airshaft that ran through the center of the building like the path of a bullet. She would lie in bed in the hot summer nights with the salt smell of the drying seabed coming in through the open window, a sheen of sweat filming her forehead and plastering the sheets to her body like tissue, while she listened to her downstairs neighbors. When they made love, their cries echoing up through the airshaft made her loins ache, and she brought release to herself silently, visualizing men with slender, oiled limbs and faces hidden in shadow.

Sometimes the neighbors sang, odd, sinuous music redolent with quarter tones. The melodies wove counterpoint like a tapestry of smoke and for some reason Suki thought of mountains. Jagged, fractal peaks thrusting out of an evergreen carpet. Summits brushed with snow. Tongues of cloud laying across the low passes.

Sometimes they argued, and the first time she heard the man's deep voice raised in anger she was sure he was a Beast, possibly an Ursa. She was less certain of the woman, but there was a sibilant, lilting quality to her voice that suggested something of the feline. They'd moved in three weeks before but their sleep cycles seemed out of sync with hers and she still hadn't met them.

Suki tried to imagine herself going downstairs to borrow something—sugar, yarn, a databead. His broad muzzle would poke out from behind the half-closed door; his liquid brown eyes would be half-closed in suspicion. They would chat for a bit, though, and perhaps he would invite her in. They would teach her their songs and their voices would rise together into the thick, warm air.

Some nights there was no singing, no arguing, no love, and Suki listened to the city, a white-noise melange of machinery and people in constant flux, like the sound of the ocean captured in a shell held to the ear. Beneath that, emanating from the spaceport on the edge of the city, a low, intermittent hum, nearly subsonic, so faint it seemed to come from somewhere inside her own body.

On those nights, she had trouble sleeping, and she would climb the rickety stairs to the roof. She couldn't see the Web, of course, but she imagined she could feel it arching overhead, lines of force crisscrossing the sky. Ships rode the Web up to where they could safely ignite their fusion drives for in-system voyages, or clung to the invisible threads all the way to their convergence at the Wyrm.

Newmoon hung in the sky, its progress just below the threshold of conscious perception—like the minute hands of a clock. She had visited there as a child, a crèche trip, and she remembered the feel of the factories humming under her feet, the metal skin pocked with micrometeorite impacts stretching to the too-close horizon, the tingling caress of her environment field.

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The heat enveloped the city like a glove around a closed fist. It kept people indoors, and business in her little shop was slow. Suki fed and watered her animals, trimmed the heartplants, and carefully tended the incubator, where she was nurturing a quintet of silkpups. Not much more than embryos now, but they would bring a good price when they birthed. Tuned to imprint themselves upon the bio-field of whoever first touched them, they were quite the rage among the Ken, who viewed their intense loyalty and affection with something like amusement. Of course, with the Ken, you never knew what that really meant.

When Suki returned home that evening, the message light was blinking over the console in the kitchen alcove. She brushed her hand across it and the burnished surface faded, replaced by a ghostly rendering of Tam's head and shoulders.

Suki jumped when she saw him.

"—been such a long time, and I just wanted to see how you were doing," Tam was saying. "The Hyaloplasm is *cold*, they never said it would be like this. And you never call me any more." He paused. "Sometimes it feels like no one remembers me."

His image faded to black. Suki stared at the screen for a long time afterward. They had called each other a lot after the aircar crash, but it made her feel strange. It wasn't quite Tam anymore—something of his essence had been lost in the upload—and there was a feeling of unhealthy enmeshment about staying in relationship with a Ghost. She hadn't taken a new lover yet, but she was ready.

She didn't want to call him back and a tendril of guilt nagged at her as she prepared her dinner. It soon gave way to resentment.

Damnit, she thought. Let the dead stay dead.

He'd turned a corner and she couldn't follow—wouldn't even if she could. Why couldn't he let her move on? Why couldn't *he* move on?

Leaving her plate of stew half-eaten, she went to the console and activated the recorder. The steady, yellow light above the blank screen stared at her and she took a deep breath, trying to visualize Tam's face in place of her own shadowy reflection.

"I don't want you to call me any more, Tam. I have to get on with my life. I'm sorry—" Her voice caught and almost broke, but she recovered. "Goodbye."

With a few shaky keystrokes she set the console to play back the message in response to Tam's signet.

She returned to her meal, but she was restless. After pushing bits of vegetable and tofu from one side of the bowl to the other for the third time, she got up from the table, went to the console, and downloaded "Versala Dreams," a lavish historical romance she'd been meaning to scan, rich in costumes, intrigue, and sex. She put the databead into the

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reader and leaned back on the couch. The induction field wrapped around her optic nerve like an invisible, coiled worm.

On the eleventh day of the heatwave, she awoke with the feeling that things were about to change. It was still oppressively hot, but there was a smell of clean moisture in the air, of something besides death and age wafting in from the salt sea.

She ate a spare breakfast of cracked wheat and blood oranges, and left early for work, treading quietly as she passed the Ursa's apartment on the floor below. She could picture them in there, all the shutters drawn, he and his cat-woman curled together on a padded mat, deep in the shadow of sleep.

The streets were almost deserted—it was the hush before the morning flurry of activity—and she enjoyed the feeling that the city was hers alone. She had to walk nearly half a click before she found a bicycle, and the one she found had its front wheel bent slightly out of alignment, so that she wobbled from side to side as she rode down the Avenue of Palms toward what used to be the waterfront.

As she rode, the city seemed to awaken around her. The tree-lined street filled with men and women on bicycles, with Beasts pulling wheeled carts. Low residential buildings of pink desert stone gave way to a chaotic clutter of commerce. Mechs wove through the traffic on silent cushions of air, full of purpose.

When she got to the Boardwalk, she stopped and leaned the bicycle against a lamppost. Almost immediately, a pleasant-looking young man took it with an apologetic smile.

"Careful," she said. "The wheel is bent." He shrugged, smiled again, and wobbled down the Boardwalk before she could say anything more.

Suki sighed.

In the distance, wavering in heat haze, the sea hugged the flat horizon like a layer of mercury, almost too bright to look at. Long wharves stretched out into the salt flats. A strong, coppery smell hung in the air.

There was a faint pop from the direction of the spaceport, like the sound a small boy might make expelling a puff of air through his lips. The ionization trail from an ascending ship cut the sky in half, faded, and was gone.

The silkpups were almost ready. Their vitals scrolled past on the incubator display, slender threads beginning to bear the full weight of life. The pups themselves still didn't look like much—hairless rats, primitive and inert.

She heard a noise and looked up. Standing at the counter was an elderly female Ken and her Speaker. She hadn't heard them come in.

"Hello," she said, a little too abruptly.

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The Speaker's eyes rolled up in his head. "Good morning," he said. "We didn't mean to startle you. Please forgive." His voice was metallic and brittle.

"It's all—"

"You have silkpups for sale?"

Conversations with the Ken were always like this—off-balance and skewed, full of sharp corners.

Suki forced herself to look in the Ken's bird-like eyes as she replied. "Yes. Well, no—not yet. But this brood will birth tomorrow."

The Speaker's eyes returned to focus on Suki. She turned to him and he nodded brusquely. Together, he and the Ken turned and walked out of the shop. A musty odor, like old, damp cloth, hung behind them in the still air, noticeable even over the familiar smells of animals and hydroponics.

Suki didn't know if she'd offended her or not, but she resolved to put it out of her mind. She was dealing with Ken, after all.

Business after that was slow, but a wealthy, young couple bought a rare icebird from Nortith, complete with an environment-field generator to maintain its habitat. The sale more than adequately fleshed out Suki's profit margin for the day.

Feeling pleased with herself, she closed up shop early and walked down to the waterfront. The Boardwalk was crowded—Beasts, Ken and their Speakers, human tourists from all over.

An old jetty stretched out into the salt toward the distant, retreating sea like an accusing finger. It was much less crowded than the Boardwalk, and Suki found herself drawn to it. As she walked down its length, hearing the wood—*wood!*—creak beneath her feet, she wondered what it had been like when the sea was right here. She tried to imagine it, soft blue-green, gentle on the eyes, sails and hovercraft drifting lazily to and fro.

She sat down on a low bench at the end of the jetty and closed her eyes. Images of Tam's face kept intruding into her consciousness, and she pushed them away. She tried to empty her mind, to reduce herself to a simple, animal presence basking in sunlight. After a short while, though, she heard footsteps tapping hollowly along the jetty, coming closer. She opened her eyes.

A tall, young man was approaching. There was something strange about the way he carried himself, and it wasn't until he came closer that she could see the crystals embedded in his temples. He was blind. When he came closer still, she saw the fine, radial scars around his eyes. A Void Dancer.

A shudder passed through her. *A Void Dancer*. She'd never met one, but everyone knew what they did. Take a one-person jumpship and dive into the Wyrm at a velocity and angle of incidence nobody had ever tried

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before. Mapping the Universe by throwing darts, blindfolded, in an empty room.

"May I join you?" he asked.

"Of course," she stammered.

He sat down next to her and sighed. She looked over at him. Handsome, except for the scars, and not as young as she had first thought.

"Sometimes," he said, "the crowds . . ." He faced the salt flats. "The empty space is soothing."

She tried to imagine the crystals in his temples sending out a silent screech of ultrasound, receiving echoes, constructing a pattern to send to his brain, bypassing his withered optic nerve.

"What do you see?" she asked, surprised at her boldness.

He smiled. His eyes were mottled pools of grey jelly, but Suki still had the sense of being held in that lifeless gaze. "It's like an old photographic negative. Do you know what that is?"

She nodded.

"But that's just the interpretation my brain makes of the data from the tweeters." He tapped his temple. "What it actually looks like . . ." He shrugged. "What does that really mean?"

They were silent for awhile.

"What do you see when you're out *there?*" Suki asked.

He smiled again. "It's . . . different. I don't know if I can explain it. The ship is my whole body; my awareness of things around me comes through as a kind of kinesthesia. Or that's what the medicals say, anyway." The curdled jelly in his eye-sockets seemed to quiver gently. "I sense a nearby mass as a sort of plucking at my skin. The electromagnetic spectrum gets filtered through to me as olfactory sensation—a deep, hot smell for the infrared, a sharp whiff of ozone up in the UV—"

He paused. "But I'm prattling on. Tell me about yourself. You have a name?"

"Suki."

"Roan," he said, and held out his hand. It was dry as paper and completely smooth.

"Do you work here in the city?"

"Yes, I have a little shop on Front Street, not far from the spaceport, actually. Organic complements. Mostly grown in-house, but I get a few naturals from time to time."

He nodded. "I know Front Street. Do you know that I grew up not far from there? That was a long time ago, of course." Had he eyes, they would have rolled heavenward as he calculated the dilation. "Eleven hundred and seven years, to be exact. The sea was still lapping at this pier!"

"A long time ago," she agreed.

Again, they were silent. Strangely, the silence did not feel awkward to Suki, but rather like they were occupying the same space together.

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"Perhaps you'd like to come by the shop sometime," Suki said, again a little surprised at her boldness. "Something for your ship—a bonsai tree, a heartplant . . ."

His smile was a bit forced this time and she winced at her stupidity. "I would hardly be able to enjoy it," he said.

"Of course—"

"But I would come by to see *you*."

Suki felt her face flush and she wondered if his tweeters could detect the warm blood rushing to her cheeks.

She took the long way home, through the administrative district on the other side of the Lhoss Gardens. A new building was going up—a crew of Oxen on the ground pushed wheeled pallets piled high with building materials, while Cats climbed the scaffolding that surrounded the blocky, unfinished pyramid.

Suki stopped her bicycle and balanced on one foot, watching, listening. The Oxen called to each other in low, bleating tones that mingled with the sibilant cries from above. It was recognizable as her own tongue, but there were words she couldn't understand. Always a few more, it seemed, each time she heard them speak. Each time she stopped to listen. The Beasts were changing, drifting off onto their own trajectory. She envied them their transit of undiscovered territory.

The neighbors sang again that night. Lying in bed, her gaze angling up through the window, she imagined the close, hollow harmonies lifting her like a cushion of air toward the box of starry sky at the mouth of the airshaft.

She thought of Roan. He'd said he would come by the shop tomorrow. She wondered if he would.

She thought of Tam. Her system had logged two calls from him, so she knew her message had been received. She pushed aside the feelings of guilt that began to take shape and tried to construct a picture of Roan's face in her mind, but it was elusive. All she could evoke clearly were the eyes—moist flecks of cloudy jelly set in hollows of leathery, scarred skin.

If the eyes are truly windows to the soul, she thought, what do they reveal of his?

Her hand stole between her legs and she imagined his hands moving across her body, his sweet breath warm on her neck. The peak of her pleasure braided with the music echoing up through the airshaft and segued seamlessly into a dream. They were sitting on the bench at the end of the pier. The water, blue as his eyes, made gentle sounds lapping up against the pilings. A dense, organic smell hung in the air like a fog hugging the surface of the sea. Birds wheeled across the sky. The sun was a shrunken, glaring wound.

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* * *

The silkpups birthed overnight, and when Suki came into the shop, they were squirming in their padded nest, crawling across one another, taking shaky, hesitant steps and collapsing in a tangle of limbs.

Their psychic energy, too, was almost palpable. The air around the incubator seemed charged. Each of them was a *tabula rasa,* engineered to bond with the first person that touched them.

There were no customers all morning and Suki busied herself with small jobs—cleaning cages, maintaining nutrient baths. The heartplants hung heavy with fruit, the tiny, fist-like buds pulsing faintly. She snapped one off, leaving a moist scar on the smooth branch. Red sap dribbled down her hand. She popped the fruit in her mouth and bit down, wincing at the explosion of salty sweetness.

Just before she was about to close up shop for lunch, Roan walked through the door. Suki was surprised and a little frightened at the surge of joy she felt.

"Hello," she stammered.

He took her hands. "Hello, yourself." The gray jelly in the hollows of his eyes seemed expressive, but of what she wasn't sure. "I don't have much time. I'm leaving tomorrow and I have a great deal to prepare."

He paused. Suki felt something inside her wither and begin to fold in upon itself.

"Could you meet me tonight?" he asked. "Midnight, the pier where we met yesterday?"

She nodded. "Midnight."

"Good." He smiled, squeezed her hand, and was gone. A bubble of silence filled the shop; gradually, the familiar rustle-whir-whisper of animals and machinery reasserted itself.

She took her lunch down to Lhoss Gardens and sat in the shadow of the Sundial, dangling her feet in one of the fountains that marked the hours.

Roan. She realized that her excitement was made keener by anticipation of loss, but she didn't care. *Maybe he would take her with him.* Even as the thought formed in her mind, though, she rejected it. Ridiculous. She was no Void Dancer.

A crèche-group passed on the far side of the Dial, moving almost as a single organism. Whispers and giggles floated across the plaza. Suki tried to study their faces, but from this distance they shared a bland sameness.

The group passed behind the black, glassy wedge at the Dial's center. They must have stopped there to rest, because they didn't emerge. It seemed to Suki that they had just walked off the face of the world.

* * *

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She was bent over the silkpups' nest, lost in their restless, wriggling motion, when her nostrils filled again with that damp musk.

She looked up. The Ken and her Speaker were standing in front of her. Once again, she hadn't heard them come in. "Hello," she said.

The Ken's bead-like eyes stared impassively back at her. She had to look away. The Speaker smiled kindly at her, and for the first time, she noticed laugh lines around his eyes. She wondered what he had to laugh about, a Speaker for the Ken. Then his smile vanished and his eyes rolled back in their sockets.

"You have silkpups today?"

Suki nodded, stepping back from the nest. Before she could say anything, the Ken reached into the enclosure and picked up a tiny, squirming pup. She held it up to her shriveled face and stared at it. Gradually, the pup stopped squirming and began to emit a low, contented hum.

The Ken looked at Suki. "Fascinating," said the Speaker. She replaced the pup in its nest, turned on her heel, and walked out the door.

Suki couldn't believe what she was seeing. Dimly, she was aware of the Speaker entering something on her credit pad. He touched her arm.

"I'm sorry," he said. It was the first time she had heard him speak with his own voice. It was low and musical. He hurried out the door after the Ken.

The silkpup lay in a corner of the nest, shivering. Suki leaned close and she could hear a high, keening whimper. Already, its littermates were shunning it—they clustered in a writhing mass of tiny arms and legs on the other side of the nest, as far away as they could get.

The imprint disrupted, the connection broken, the silkpup would soon die. There was nothing she could do.

Almost nothing.

She picked up the animal and held it, trembling, in her hand. With her other hand, she took it by the neck, closed her eyes, and gave it a quick twist.

She put the body in the disposal and for the rest of the afternoon, the shop smelled of burnt hair and ozone.

Suki parked her bike in the alley next to her building, hoping nobody would ride off with it. She felt a small stab of guilt at her selfishness, but she didn't want to wander half across the city looking for a bike and be late for Roan.

Two more attempts from Tam on her console log. When would he give up? She thought of him, bereft of flesh, suspended in purgatory, reaching back to life and light. She could no longer make the connection between that Ghost and the ghost of her own memories. He was finally gone to her.

* * *

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To her relief, the bike was still waiting where she had left it. The night air was cool, the Avenue of Palms empty at this late hour. She arrived at the old waterfront fifteen minutes early and walked her bike out to the end of the pier. She sat down on a wooden bench to wait.

Midnight came and went. By twelve-fifteen, Suki was beginning to think that Roan would not come. The salt flats spread out before her, luminous in the blue Newmoon light. Behind her, the city asleep and not asleep, hollow as an open mouth.

By twelve-thirty, she was sure. As she mounted her bike, the ionization trail from an ascending ship lanced across the sky, followed by a faint popping sound. She blinked back the afterimage, a straight, bright scar across her vision, and wondered if it was Roan.

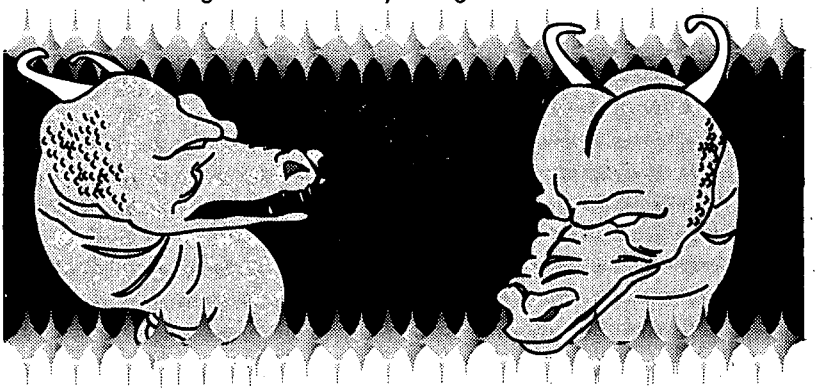
She rode home slowly, through quiet side streets. She felt nothing.

As she passed by the Ursa's apartment on her way up to her own, she paused to listen. They were singing—his low voice a modal drone, hers above sinuous and agile, weaving in and out of the tonal center.

She walked up to the door, pressed her cheek against the cold, smooth surface. The music seemed to enter her body through that contact, sending delicate tendrils down her neck, spreading through her chest and out her arms and legs, filling her with warmth. ●

THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON

Ours was the burning, the autumn love,
born on the morning the maples caught fire,
pointed tongues of scarlet and copper licking
at the sky. His sharp teeth closed
tenderly upon my neck; under our claws
the grass crackled dry and gold.



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Later he dragged trinkets of gold
into our chosen cavern, odd tokens of love
scattered across cold earth. My restless claws
clinked and rattled; a hundred shrunken fires
blossomed with my breath. We huddled close
against the chill of winter licking

at our bones. I shifted, irritable, and licked
the cracked skin of my swollen belly. Gold
makes an awkward nest. He hovered close
despite my temper; I wondered if he loved
me, and what that might mean. I dreamed of fire
and roar, flight and breath and teeth and claws.

In spring my children were born. Tiny claws
pricked like thorns as they nuzzled and licked,
suckled and tumbled and kindled a fire
in my heart. Outside, dust danced gold
in slanted pillars of sunlight, and this love,
I thought, this love alters everything. I closed

my eyes but I could smell him still: *too close*
sang the old warning in my bones. My claws
flexed; my wings spread protectively. Go, love,
I told him, go now while you can. He only licked
my chin, crooning, and gazed at me with eyes gold
as birch leaves in autumn. I swallowed my fire.

But I watched him, wary yet, while the sun's fire
lit the lengthening days and heat hung close
and heavy upon us all. I saw the gold
eyes narrow to jealous slivers, and when he clawed
at my boldest son I was ready; my flame licked
across his face before he struck. So passed our love.

My lover burned black under my summer fire.
I licked my brood, curved my tail to keep them close,
and dug my claws in deep among the ashes and the gold.

—Karawynn Long

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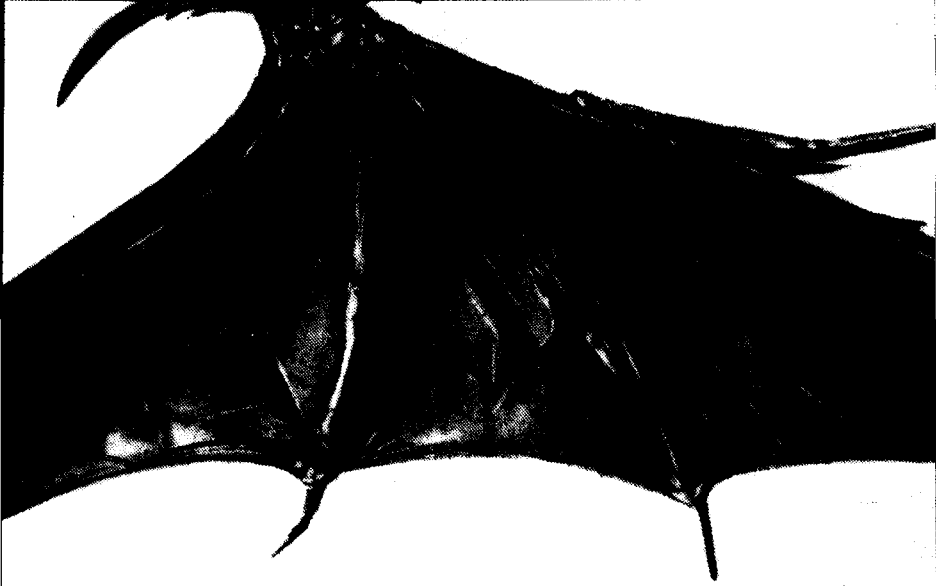

George R. R. Martin

BLOOD OF THE DRAGON

After far-too-long an absence, Hugo- and Nebula-award-winner George R.R. Martin returns to our pages with a magnificent new novella. "Blood of the Dragon" is part of the author's epic series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The first book in this saga, *A Game of Thrones*, will [illegible] from Bantam/Spectra in September. Mr. Martin is currently at [illegible] second novel, *Dance with Dragons*.

[illegible] Darryl Elliott

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Her brother held the gown up for her inspection. "This is beauty. Touch it. Go on. Caress the fabric."

Dany touched it. The cloth was so smooth that it seemed to run through her fingers like water. She could not remember ever wearing anything so soft. It frightened her. She pulled her hand away. "Is it really mine?"

"A gift from the Magister Illyrio," Viserys said, smiling. Her brother was in a high mood tonight. "The color will bring out the violet in your eyes. And you shall have gold as well, and jewels of all sorts. Illyrio has promised. Tonight you must look like a princess."

A princess, Dany thought. She had forgotten what that was like. Perhaps she had never really known. "Why does he give us so much?" she asked. "What does he want from us?" For almost a month, they had lived in the magister's house, eating his food, pampered by his servants. Dany was twelve, old enough to know that such gifts seldom came without their price, here in the free city of Pentos.

"Illyrio is no fool," Viserys said. He was twenty, a gaunt young man with nervous hands and a feverish look in his pale lilac eyes. "The Magister knows that I will not forget my friends when I come into my throne."

Dany said nothing. Magister Illyrio was a dealer in spices, gemstones, dragonbone, and other, less savory things. He had friends in all of the Nine Free Cities, it was said, and even beyond, in Vaes Dothrak and the fabled lands beside the Jade Sea. It was also said that he'd never had a friend he wouldn't cheerfully sell for the right price. Dany listened to the talk in the streets, and she heard these things, but she knew better than to question her brother when he wove his webs of dream. His anger was a terrible thing when roused. Viserys called it *waking the dragon.*

Her brother hung the gown beside the door. "Illyrio will send the slaves to bathe you. Be sure you wash off the stink of the stables. Khal Drogo has a thousand horses, tonight he looks for a different sort of mount." He studied her critically. "You still slouch. Straighten yourself." He pushed back her shoulders with his hands. "Let them see that you have a woman's shape now." His fingers brushed lightly over her budding breasts and tightened on a nipple. "You will not fail me tonight. If you do, it will go hard for you. You don't want to wake the dragon, do you?" His fingers twisted her, the pinch cruelly hard through the rough fabric of her tunic. "*Do you?*" he repeated.

"No," Dany said meekly.

Her brother smiled. "Good." He touched her hair, almost with affection. "When they write the history of my reign, sweet sister, they will say that it began tonight."

When he was gone, Dany went to her window and looked out wistfully on the waters of the bay. The square brick towers of Pentos were black silhouettes outlined against the setting sun. Dany could hear the singing

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of the red priests as they lit their night-fires, and the shouts of ragged children playing games beyond the walls of the estate. For a moment, she wished she could be out there with them, barefoot and breathless and dressed in tatters, with no past and no future and no feast to attend at Khal Drogo's manse.

Somewhere beyond the sunset, across the narrow sea, lay a land of green hills and flowered plains and great rushing rivers, where towers of dark stone rose amidst magnificent blue-gray mountains, and armored knights rode to battle beneath the banners of their lords. The Dothraki called that land *Rhaesh Andahli,* the land of the Andals. In the Free Cities, they talked of Westeros and the Sunset Kingdoms. Her brother had a simpler name. "Our land," he called it. The words were like a prayer with him. If he said them enough, the gods were sure to hear. "Ours by blood right, taken from us by treachery, but ours still, ours forever. You do not steal from the dragon, oh no. The dragon remembers."

And perhaps the dragon did remember, but Dany could not. She had never seen this land her brother said was theirs, this realm beyond the narrow sea. These places he talked of, Casterly Rock and the Eyrie, Highgarden and the Vale of Arryn, Dorne and the Isle of Faces, they were just words to her. Viserys had been a boy of eight when they fled King's Landing to escape the advancing armies of the Usurper, but Daenerys had been only a quickening in their mother's womb.

Yet sometimes Dany would picture the way it had been, so often had her brother told her the stories. The midnight flight to Dragonstone, moonlight shimmering on the ship's black sails. Her brother Rhaegar battling the Usurper in the bloody waters of the Trident, and dying for the woman he loved. The sack of King's Landing by the ones Viserys called the Usurper's dogs, the lords Lannister and Stark. Princess Elia of Dorne pleading for mercy as Rhaegar's heir was ripped from her breast and murdered before her eyes. The polished skulls of the last dragons staring down sightlessly from the walls of the throne room as the Kingslayer opened father's throat with a golden sword.

She had been born on Dragonstone nine moons after their flight, while a raging summer storm threatened to rip the island fastness apart. They said that storm was terrible. The Targaryen fleet was smashed while it lay at anchor, and huge stone blocks were ripped from the parapets and sent hurtling into the wild waters of the narrow sea. Her mother had died birthing her, and for that her brother Viserys had never forgiven her.

She did not remember Dragonstone either. They had run again, just before the Usurper's brother set sail with his newbuilt fleet. By then only Dragonstone itself, the ancient seat of their House, had remained of the Seven Kingdoms that had once been theirs. It would not remain for long.

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The garrison had been prepared to sell them to the Usurper, but one night Ser Willem Darry and four loyal men had broken into the nursery and stolen them both, along with her wet nurse, and set sail under cover of darkness for the safety of the Braavosian coast.

She remembered Ser Willem dimly, a great gray bear of a man, half-blind, roaring and bellowing orders from his sickbed. The servants had lived in terror of him, but he had always been kind to Dany. He called her "Little Princess" and sometimes "My Lady," and his hands were soft as old leather. He never left his bed, though, and the smell of sickness clung to him day and night, a hot, moist, sickly sweet odor. That was when they had lived in Tyrosh, in the big house with the red door. Dany had slept in her own room there, with a lemon tree outside her window. After Ser Willem had died, the servants had stolen what little money they had left, and soon after they had been put out of the big house. Dany had cried when the red door closed behind them forever.

They had wandered since then, from Tyrosh to Myr, from Myr to Braavos, and on to Qohor and Volantis and Lys, never staying long in any one place. Her brother would not allow it. The Usurper's hired knives were close behind them, he insisted, though Dany had never seen one.

At first the magisters and archons and merchant princes were pleased to welcome the last Targaryens to their homes and tables, but as the years passed and the Usurper continued to sit upon the Iron Throne, doors closed and their lives grew meaner. Years past they had been forced to sell their last few treasures, and now even the coin they had gotten from mother's crown had gone. In the alleys and wine sinks of Pentos, they called her brother "the beggar king." Dany did not want to know what they called her.

"We will have it all back someday, sweet sister," he would promise her. Sometimes his hands shook when he talked about it. "The jewels and the silks, Dragonstone and King's Landing, the Iron Throne and the Seven Kingdoms, all they have taken from us, we will have it back." Viserys lived for that day. All that Daenerys wanted back was the big house with the red door, the lemon tree outside her window, the childhood she had never known.

There came a soft knock on her door. "Come," Dany said, turning away from the window. Illyrio's servants entered, bowed, and set about their business. They were slaves, a gift from one of the magister's many Dothraki friends. There was no slavery in the free city of Pentos. Nonetheless, they were slaves. The old woman, small and gray as a mouse, never said a word, but the girl made up for it. She was Illyrio's favorite, a fair-haired, blue-eyed wench of sixteen who chattered constantly as she worked.

They filled her bath with hot water brought up from the kitchen and

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scented it with fragrant oils. The girl pulled the rough cotton tunic over Dany's head, and helped her into the tub. The water was scalding hot, but Daenerys did not flinch or cry out. She liked the heat. It made her feel clean. Besides, her brother had often told her that it was never too hot for a Targaryen. "Ours is the house of the dragon," he would say. "The fire is in our blood."

The old woman washed her long, silver-pale hair and gently combed out the snags, all in silence. The girl scrubbed her back and her feet and told her how lucky she was. "Drogo is so rich that even his slaves wear golden collars. A hundred thousand men ride in his *khalasar,* and his palace in Vaes Dothrak has two hundred rooms and doors of solid silver." There was more like that, so much more, what a handsome man the *khal* was, so tall and fierce, fearless in battle, the best rider ever to mount a horse, a demon archer. Daenerys said nothing. She had always assumed that she would marry Viserys, when she came of age. For centuries the Targaryens had wed brother to sister, since Aegon the Conquerer had taken his sister Rhaenys to bride. The line must be kept pure, Viserys had told her a thousand times; theirs was the kingsblood, the golden blood of old Valyria, the blood of the dragon. Dragons did not mate with the beasts of the field, and Targaryens did not mingle their blood with that of lesser men. Yet now Viserys schemed to sell her to a stranger, a barbarian.

When she was clean, the slaves helped her from the water and toweled her dry. The girl brushed her hair until it shone like molten silver, while the old woman anointed her with the spiceflower perfume of the Dothraki plains, a dab on each wrist, behind her ears, on the tips of her breasts, and one last one, cool on her lips, down there between her legs. They dressed her in the wisps that Magister Illyrio had sent up, and then the gown, a deep plum silk to bring out the violet in her eyes. The girl slid the gilded sandals onto her feet, while the old woman fixed the tiara in her hair, and the ruby-studded bracelets around each wrist, and last of all the collar, a heavy golden torc emblazoned with Dothraki glyphs.

"Now you look all a princess," the girl said breathlessly when they were done. Dany glanced at her image in the silvered looking glass that Magister Illyrio had so thoughtfully provided. *A princess,* she thought, but she remembered what the girl had said, how Khal Drogo was so rich even his slaves wore golden collars. She felt a sudden chill, and gooseflesh pimpled the flesh of her bare arms.

Her brother was waiting in the cool of the entry hall, seated on the edge of the pool, his hand trailing in the water. He rose when she appeared and looked her over critically. "Stand there," he told her. "Turn around. Yes. Good. You look . . ."

"Regal," Magister Illyrio said, stepping through an archway. He moved with surprising delicacy for such a massive man. Beneath loose garments

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of flame-colored silk, rolls of fat jiggled as he walked. Gemstones glittered on every finger, and his man had oiled his forked yellow beard until it shone like real gold. "May the Lord of Light shower you with blessings on this most fortunate day, Princess Daenerys," the magister said as he took her hand. He bowed his head, showing a thin glimpse of crooked yellow teeth through the gold of his beard. "She is a vision, Your Grace, a vision," he told her brother. "Drogo will be enraptured."

"She's too skinny," Viserys said. His hair, the same silver-blond as hers, had been pulled back tightly behind his head and fastened with a dragonbone brooch. It was a severe look that emphasized the hard, gaunt lines of his face. He rested his hand on the hilt of the sword that Illyrio had lent him, and said, "Are you sure that Khal Drogo likes his women this young?"

"She has had her blood. She is old enough for the *khal*," Illyrio told him, not for the first time. "Look at her. That silver-gold hair, those purple eyes. . . . she is the blood of old Valyria, no doubt, no doubt . . . and highborn, daughter of the old king, sister to the new, she cannot fail to entrance our Drogo." When he released her hand, Daenerys found herself trembling.

"I suppose," her brother said doubtfully. "The savages have queer tastes. Boys, horses, sheep . . ."

"Best not suggest this to Khal Drogo," Illyrio said.

Anger flashed in her brother's lilac eyes. "Do you take me for a fool?"

The magister bowed slightly. "I take you for a king. Kings lack the caution of common men. My apologies if I have given offense." He turned away and clapped his hands for his bearers.

The streets of Pentos were pitch dark when they set out in Illyrio's elaborately carved palanquin. A torchbearer went ahead to light their way, while a dozen strong men hoisted the poles to their shoulders. It was warm and close inside behind the curtains. Dany could smell the stench of Illyrio's pallid flesh through his heavy perfumes.

Her brother, sprawled out on his pillows beside her, never noticed. His mind was away across the narrow sea. "We won't need his whole *khalasar*," Viserys said. His fingers toyed with the hilt of his borrowed blade, though Dany knew he had never used a sword in earnest. "Ten thousand, that would be enough, I could sweep the Seven Kingdoms with ten thousand Dothraki screamers. The realm will rise for its rightful king. Tyrell, Redwyne, Darry, Greyjoy, they have no more love for the Usurper than I do. The Dornishmen burn to avenge Elia and her children. And the smallfolk will be with us. They cry out for their king." He looked at Illyrio anxiously. "They do, don't they?"

"They are your people, and they love you well," Magister Illyrio said amiably. "In holdfasts all across the realm, men lift secret toasts to your health while women sew dragon banners and hide them against the day

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of your return from across the water." He gave a massive shrug. "Or so my agents tell me."

Dany had no agents, no way of knowing what anyone was doing or thinking across the narrow sea, but she mistrusted Illyrio's sweet words as she mistrusted everything about Illyrio. Her brother was nodding eagerly, however. "I shall kill the Usurper myself," he promised, who had never killed anyone, "as he killed my brother Rhaegar. And Lannister too, the Kingslayer, for what he did to my father."

"That would be most fitting," Magister Illyrio said. Dany saw the smallest hint of a smile playing around his full lips, but her brother did not notice. Nodding, he pushed back a curtain and stared off into the night, and Dany knew he was fighting the Battle of the Trident once again.

The nine-towered manse of Khal Drogo sat beside the waters of the bay, its high brick walls overgrown with pale ivy. It had been given to the *khal* by the magisters of Pentos, Illyrio told them. The Free Cities were always generous with the horselords. "It is not that we fear these barbarians," Illyrio would explain with a smile. "The Lord of Light would hold our city walls against a million Dothraki, or so the red priests promise . . . yet why take chances, when their friendship comes so cheap?"

Their palanquin was stopped at the gate, the curtains pulled roughly back by one of Drogo's houseguard. He had the copper skin and dark almond eyes of a Dothraki, but his face was hairless and he wore the spiked bronze cap of the Unsullied. He looked them over coldly. Magister Illyrio growled something to him in the rough Dothraki tongue; the guardsman replied in the same voice, and waved them through the gates.

Dany noticed that her brother's hand was clenched tightly around the hilt of his borrowed sword. He looked almost as frightened as she felt. "Insolent eunuch," Viserys muttered as the palanquin lurched up toward the manse.

Magister Illyrio's words were honey. "Many important men will be at the feast tonight. Such men have enemies. The *khal* must protect his guests, yourself chief among them, Your Grace. No doubt the Usurper would pay well for your head."

"Oh, yes," Viserys said darkly. "He has tried, Illyrio, I promise you that. His hired knives follow us everywhere. I am the last dragon, and he will not sleep easy while I live."

The palanquin slowed and stopped. The curtains were thrown back, and a slave offered a hand to help Daenerys out. His collar, she noted, was ordinary bronze. Her brother followed, one hand still clenched hard around his sword hilt. It took two strong men to get Magister Illyrio back on his feet.

Inside the manse, the air was heavy with the scent of spices, pinchfire and sweet lemon and cinnamon. They were escorted across the entry hall, where a mosaic of colored glass depicted the Doom of Valyria. Be-

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neath an arch of twining stone leaves, a eunuch sang their coming. "Viserys of the House Targaryen, the Third of his Name," he called in a high, sweet voice, "King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. His sister Daenerys Stormborn, Princess of Dragonstone. His honorable host Illyrio Mopatis, Magister of the Free City of Pentos."

They stepped past the eunuch into a pillared courtyard overgrown in pale ivy. Moonlight painted the leaves in shades of bone and silver as the guests drifted among them. Most were Dothraki horselords, big men with red-brown skin, their drooping mustachios bound in bronze rings, their black hair oiled and braided and hung with bells. Yet among them moved bravos and sellswords from Pentos and Myr and Tyrosh, a red priest even fatter than Illyrio, hairy men from the Port of Ibben and lords from the Summer Isles with skin as black as ebony. Daenerys looked at them all in wonder . . . and realized, with a sudden start of fear, that she was the only woman there.

Illyrio whispered to them. "Those three are Drogo's bloodriders, there," he said. "By the pillar is Khal Moro, with his son Rhogoro. The man with the green beard is brother to the Archon of Tyrosh, and the man behind him is Ser Jorah Mormont."

The last name caught Daenerys. "A knight?"

"No less." Illyrio smiled through his beard. "Anointed with the seven oils by the High Septon himself."

"What is he doing here?" she blurted.

"The Usurper wanted his head," Illyrio told them. "Some trifling affront. He sold some poachers to a Tyroshi slaver instead of giving them to the Night's Watch. Absurd law. A man should be able to do as he likes with his own chattel."

"I shall wish to speak with Ser Jorah before the night is done," her brother said. Dany found herself looking at the knight curiously. He was an older man, past forty and balding, but still strong and fit. Instead of silks and cottons, he wore wool and leather. His tunic was a dark green, embroidered with the likeness of a black bear standing on two legs.

She was still looking at this strange man from the homeland she had never known when Magister Illyrio placed a moist hand on her bare shoulder. "Over there, sweet princess," he whispered, "there is the *khal* himself."

Dany wanted to run and hide, but her brother was looking at her, and if she displeased him she knew she would wake the dragon. Anxiously, she turned and looked at the man Viserys hoped would ask to wed her before the night was done.

The slave girl had not been far wrong, she thought. Khal Drogo was a head taller than the tallest man in the room, yet somehow light on his feet, as graceful as the panther in Illyrio's menagerie. He was younger

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than she'd thought, no more than thirty. His skin was the color of polished copper, his mustachios thick and fierce and bound with silver rings.

"I must go and make my submissions," Magister Illyrio said. "Wait here. I shall bring him to you."

Her brother took her by the arm as Illyrio waddled over to the *khal,* his fingers squeezing so hard that they hurt. "Do you see his braid, sweet sister?"

Drogo's braid was black as midnight and heavy with scented oil, hung with a dozen tiny silver bells that rang softly as he moved. It swung well past his belt, below even his buttocks, the end of it brushing against the back of his thighs.

"You see how long it is?" Viserys said. "When Dothraki are defeated in combat, they cut off their braids in disgrace, so the world will know their shame. Khal Drogo has never lost a fight. He is Aegon the Dragonlord come again, and you will be his queen."

Dany looked at Khal Drogo. His face was hard and cruel, his eyes as cold and dark as onyx. Her brother hurt her sometimes, when she woke the dragon, but he did not frighten her the way this man frightened her. "I don't want to be his queen," she heard herself say in a small, thin voice. "Please, *please* Viserys, I don't want to, I want to go home."

"*Home?*" He kept his voice low, but she could hear the fury in his tone. "How are we to go home, sweet sister? They took our home from us!" He drew her into the shadows, out of sight, his fingers digging into her skin. "*How are we to go home?*" he repeated, meaning King's Landing, and Dragonstone, and all the realm they had lost.

Dany had only meant their rooms in Illyrio's estate, no true home surely, but all they had, but her brother did not want to hear that. There was no home there for him. Even the big house with the red door had not been home for him. His fingers dug hard into her arm, demanding an answer. "I don't know . . ." she said at last, her voice breaking. Tears welled in her eyes.

"I do," he said sharply. "We go home with an army, sweet sister. With Khal Drogo's army, that is how we go home. And if you must wed him and bed him for that, you will." He smiled at her. "I'd let his whole *khalasar* fuck you if need be, sweet sister, all forty thousand men, and their horses too if that was what it took to get my army. Be grateful it is only Drogo. In time you may even learn to like him. Now dry your eyes. Illyrio is bringing him over, and he will *not* see you crying."

Dany turned and saw that it was true. Magister Illyrio, all smiles and bows, was escorting Khal Drogo over to where they stood. She brushed away unfallen tears with the back of her hand.

"Smile," Viserys whispered nervously, his hand falling to the hilt of his sword. "And stand up straight. Let him see that you have breasts. Gods know, you have little enough as is."

Daenerys smiled, and stood up straight.

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II

"The Dothraki sea," Ser Jorah Mormont said to Dany, as he reined to a halt beside her on the top of the ridge.

Beneath them, the plain stretched out immense and empty, a vast flat expanse that reached to the distant horizon and beyond. It *was* a sea, Dany thought. Past here, there were no hills, no mountains, no trees nor cities nor roads, only the endless grasses, the tall blades rippling like waves when the winds blew. "It's so green," she said.

"Here and now," Ser Jorah agreed. "You ought to see it when it blooms, all dark red flowers from horizon to horizon, like a sea of blood. Come the dry season, and the world turns the color of old bronze. And this is only *hranna*, child. There are a hundred kinds of grass out there, grasses as yellow as lemon and as dark as indigo, blue grasses and orange grasses and grasses like rainbows. Down in the Shadow Lands beyond Asshai, they say there are oceans of ghost grass, taller than a man on horseback with stalks as pale as milkglass. It murders all other grass and glows in the dark with the spirits of the damned. The Dothraki claim that someday ghost grass will cover the entire world, and then all life will end."

That thought gave Dany the shivers. "I don't want to talk about that now," she said. "It's so beautiful here, I don't want to think about everything dying."

"As you will, *khaleesi*," Ser Jorah said respectfully. The exile had offered her brother his sword the night Dany had been sold to Khal Drogo; Viserys had accepted eagerly.

She heard the sound of voices and turned to look behind her. She and Mormont had outdistanced the rest of their party, and now the others were climbing the ridge below them. Her handmaid Irri and the young archers of her *khas* were fluid as centaurs, but Viserys still struggled with the short stirrups and the flat saddle. Her brother was miserable out here. He ought never have come. Magister Illyrio had urged him to wait in Pentos, had offered him the hospitality of his manse, but Viserys would have none of it. He would stay with Drogo until the debt had been paid, until he had the crown he had been promised. "And if he tries to cheat me, he will learn to his sorrow what it means to wake the dragon," Viserys had vowed, laying a hand on his borrowed sword. Illyrio had blinked at that and wished him good fortune.

Dany realized that she did not want to listen to any of her brother's complaints right now. The day was too perfect. The sky was a deep blue, and high above them a hunting hawk circled. The grass sea swayed and sighed with each breath of wind, the air was warm on her face, and Dany felt at peace. She would not let Viserys spoil it.

"Wait here," Dany told Ser Jorah. "Tell them all to stay. Tell them I command it."

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The knight smiled. Ser Jorah was not a handsome man. He had a neck and shoulders like a bull, and coarse black hair covered his arms and chest so thickly that there was none left for his head. Yet his smiles gave Dany comfort. "You are learning to talk like a queen, Daenerys."

"Not a queen," said Dany. "A *khaleesi*." She wheeled her horse about and galloped down the ridge alone.

The descent was steep and rocky, but Dany rode fearlessly, and the joy and the danger of it was a song in her heart. All her life Viserys had told her she was a princess, but not until she rode her silver had Daenerys Targaryen ever felt like one.

At first it had not come easy. The *khalasar* had broken camp the morning after her wedding, moving east toward Vaes Dothrak, and by the third day Dany thought she was going to die. Saddle sores opened on her bottom, hideous and bloody. Her thighs were chafed raw, her hands blistered from the reins, the muscles of her legs and back so wracked with pain that she could scarcely sit. By the time dusk fell, her handmaids would need to help her down from her mount.

Even the nights brought no relief. Khal Drogo ignored her when they rode, even as he had ignored her during their wedding, and spent his evenings drinking with his warriors and bloodriders, racing his prize horses, watching women dance and men die. Dany had no place in these parts of his life. She was left to sup alone, or with Ser Jorah and her brother, and afterward to cry herself to sleep. Yet every night, some time before the dawn, Drogo would come to her tent, and wake her in the dark, to ride her as relentlessly as he rode his stallion. He always took her from behind, Dothraki fashion, for which Dany was grateful; that way her lord husband could not see the tears that wet her face, and she could use her pillow to muffle her cries of pain. When he was done, he would close his eyes and begin to snore softly and Dany would lie beside him, her body bruised and sore, hurting too much for sleep.

Day followed day, and night followed night, until Dany knew she could not endure a moment longer. She would kill herself rather than go on, she decided one night. . . .

Yet when she slept that night, she dreamt the dragon dream again. Viserys was not in it this time. There was only her and the dragon. Its scales were black as night, wet and slick with blood. *Her* blood, Dany sensed. Its eyes were pools of molten gold, and when it opened its mouth, the flame came roaring out in a hot jet. She could hear it singing to her. She opened her arms and walked into the fire, embraced it, let it swallow her whole, let it cleanse her and temper her and scour her clean. She could feel her flesh sear and blacken and slough away, could feel her blood boil and turn to steam, and yet there was no pain. She felt strong and new and fierce.

And the next day, strangely, she did not seem to hurt quite so much. It

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was as if the gods had heard her and taken pity. Even her handmaids noticed the change. "*Khaleesi,*" Jhiqui said, "what is wrong? Are you sick?"

"I was," she answered, standing over the dragon's eggs that Illyrio had given her when she wed. She touched one, the largest of the three, running her hand lightly over the shell. *Black and scarlet,* she thought, *like the dragon in my dream.* The stone felt strangely warm beneath her fingers . . . or was she still dreaming? She pulled her hand back nervously.

From that hour onward, each day was easier than the one before it. Her legs grew stronger; her blisters burst and her hands grew calluses; her soft thighs toughened, supple as leather.

The *khal* had commanded the handmaid Irri to teach Dany to ride in the Dothraki fashion, but it was the filly who was her real teacher. The horse seemed to know her moods, as if they shared a single mind. With every passing day, Dany felt surer in her seat. The Dothraki were a hard and unsentimental people, and it was not their custom to name their animals, so Dany thought of her horse only as the silver. She had never loved anything so much.

As the riding became less an ordeal, Dany began to notice the beauties of the land around her. She rode at the head of the *khalasar* with Drogo and his bloodriders, so she came to each country fresh and unspoiled. Behind them the great horde might tear the earth and muddy the rivers and send up clouds of choking dust, but the fields ahead of them were always green and verdant.

They crossed the rolling hills of Norvos, past terraced farms and small villages where the townsfolk watched anxiously from atop white stucco walls. They forded three wide placid rivers and a fourth that was swift and narrow and treacherous, camped beside a high blue waterfall, skirted the tumbled ruins of a vast dead city where ghosts were said to moan amongst blackened marble columns. They raced down Valyrian roads a thousand years old and straight as a Dothraki arrow. For half a moon, they rode through the Forest of Qohor, where the leaves made a golden canopy high above them, and the trunks of the trees were as wide as city gates. There were great elk in that wood, and spotted tigers, and lemurs with silver fur and huge purple eyes, but all fled before the approach of the *khalasar* and Dany got no glimpse of them.

By then her agony was a fading memory. She still ached after a long day's riding, yet somehow the pain had a sweetness to it now, and each morning she came willingly to her saddle, eager to know what wonders waited for her in the lands ahead. She began to find pleasure even in her nights, and if she still cried out when Drogo took her, it was not always in pain.

At the bottom of the ridge, the grasses rose around her, tall and supple. Dany slowed to a trot and rode out onto the plain, losing herself in the green, blessedly alone. In the *khalasar* she was never alone. Khal Drogo came to her only after the sun went down, but her handmaids fed

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her and bathed her and slept by the door of her tent, Drogo's bloodriders and the men of her *khas* were never far, and her brother was an unwelcome shadow, day and night. Dany could hear him on the top of the ridge, his voice shrill with anger as he shouted at Ser Jorah. She rode on, submerging herself deeper in the Dothraki sea.

The green swallowed her up. The air was rich with the scents of earth and grass, mixed with the smell of horseflesh and Dany's sweat and the oil in her hair. Dothraki smells. They seemed to belong here. Dany breathed it all in, laughing. She had a sudden urge to feel the ground beneath her, to curl her toes in that thick black soil. Swinging down from her saddle, she let the silver graze while she pulled off her high boots.

Viserys came upon her as sudden as a summer storm, his horse rearing beneath him as he reined up too hard. "You *dare!*" he screamed at her. "You give commands to *me? To me?*" He vaulted off the horse, stumbling as he landed. His face was flushed as he struggled back to his feet. He grabbed her, shook her. "Have you forgotten who you are? Look at you. *Look at you!*"

Dany did not need to look. She was barefoot, with oiled hair, wearing Dothraki riding leathers and a painted vest given her as a bride gift. She looked as though she belonged here. Viserys was soiled and stained in city silks and ringmail.

He was still screaming. "You do *not* command the dragon. Do you understand? I am the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, I will not hear orders from some horselord's slut, do you hear me?" His hand went under her vest, his fingers digging painfully into her breast. "*Do you hear me?*"

Dany shoved him away, hard.

Viserys stared at her, his lilac eyes incredulous. She had never defied him. Never fought back. Rage twisted his features. He would hurt her now, and badly, she knew that.

Crack.

The whip made a sound like thunder. The coil took Viserys around the throat and yanked him backward. He went sprawling in the grass, stunned and choking. The Dothraki riders hooted at him as he struggled to free himself. The one with the whip, young Jhogo, rasped a question. Dany did not understand his words, but by then Irri was there, and Ser Jorah, and the rest of her *khas*. "Jhogo asks if you would have him dead, *khaleesi*," Irri said.

"No," Dany replied. "No."

Jhogo understood that. One of the others barked out a comment, and the Dothraki laughed. Irri told her, "Quaro thinks you should take an ear to teach him respect."

Her brother was on his knees, his fingers digging under the leather coils, crying incoherently, struggling for breath. The whip was tight around his windpipe.

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"Tell them I do not wish him harmed," Dany said.

Irri repeated her words in Dothraki. Jhogo gave a pull on the whip, yanking Viserys around like a puppet on a string. He went sprawling again, freed from the leather embrace, a thin line of blood under his chin where the whip had cut deep.

"I warned him what would happen, my lady," Ser Jorah Mormont said. "I told him to stay on the ridge, as you commanded."

"I know you did," Dany replied, watching Viserys. He lay on the ground, sucking in air noisily, red-faced and sobbing. He was a pitiful thing. He had always been a pitiful thing. Why had she never seen that before? There was a hollow place inside her where her fear had been.

"Take his horse," Dany commanded Ser Jorah. Viserys gaped at her. He could not believe what he was hearing; nor could Dany quite believe what she was saying. Yet the words came. "Let my brother walk behind us back to the *khalasar*." Among the Dothraki, the man who does not ride was no man at all, the lowest of the low, without honor or pride. "Let everyone see him as he is."

"*No!*" Viserys screamed. He turned to Ser Jorah, pleading in the Common Tongue with words the horsemen would not understand. "Hit her, Mormont. Hurt her. Your king commands it. Kill these Dothraki dogs and teach her."

The exile knight looked from Dany to her brother; she barefoot, with dirt between her toes and oil in her hair, he with his silks and steel. Dany could see the decision on his face. "He shall walk, *khaleesi*," he said. He took her brother's horse in hand while Dany remounted her silver.

Viserys gaped at him, and sat down in the dirt. He kept his silence, but he would not move, and his eyes were full of poison as they rode away. Soon he was lost in the tall grass. When they could not see him anymore, Dany grew afraid. "Will he find his way back?" she asked Ser Jorah as they rode.

"Even a man as blind as your brother should be able to follow our trail," he replied.

"He is proud. He may be too shamed to come back."

Jorah laughed. "Where else should he go? If he cannot find the *khalasar*, the *khalasar* will most surely find him. It is hard to drown in the Dothraki sea, child."

Dany saw the truth of that. The *khalasar* was like a city on the march, but it did not march blindly. Always scouts ranged far ahead on the main column, alert for any sign of game or prey or enemies, while outriders guarded their flanks. They missed nothing, not here, in this land, the place where they had come from. These plains were a part of them . . . and of her, now.

"I hit him," she said, wonder in her voice. Now that it was over, it seemed like some strange dream that she had dreamed. "Ser Jorah, do

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you think . . . he'll be so angry when he gets back. . . ." She shivered. "I woke the dragon, didn't I?"

Ser Jorah snorted. "Can you wake the dead, girl? Your brother Rhaegar was the last dragon, and he died on the Trident. Viserys is less than the shadow of a snake."

His blunt words startled her. It seemed as though all the things she had always believed were suddenly called into question. "You . . . you swore him your sword. . . ."

"That I did, girl," Ser Jorah said. "And if your brother is the shadow of a snake, what does that make his servants?" His voice was bitter.

"He is still the true king. He is . . ."

Jorah pulled up his horse and looked at her. "Truth now. Would you want to see Viserys sit a throne?"

Dany thought about that. "He would not be a very good king, would he?"

"There have been worse . . . but not many." The knight gave his heels to his mount and started off again.

Dany rode close beside him. "Still," she said, "the common people are waiting for him. Magister Illyrio says they are sewing dragon banners and praying for Viserys to return from across the narrow sea to free them."

"The common people pray for rain, healthy children, and a summer that never ends," Ser Jorah told her. "It is no matter to them if the high lords play their game of thrones, so long as they are left in peace." He gave a shrug. "They never are."

Dany rode along quietly for a time, working his words like a puzzle box. It went against everything that Viserys had ever told her to think that the people could care so little whether a true king or usurper reigned over them. Yet the more she thought on Jorah's words, the more they rang of truth.

"What do *you* pray for, Ser Jorah?" she asked him.

"Home," he said. His voice was thick with longing.

"I pray for home too," she told him, believing it.

Ser Jorah laughed. "Look around you then, *khaleesi*."

But it was not the plains Dany saw then. It was King's Landing and the great Red Keep that Aegon the Conquerer had built. It was Dragonstone where she had been born. In her mind's eye they burned with a thousand lights, a fire blazing in every window. In her mind's eye, all the doors were red.

"My brother will never take back the Seven Kingdoms," Dany said. She had known that for a long time, she realized. She had known it all her life. Only she had never let herself say the words, even in a whisper, but now she said them for Jorah Mormont and all the world to hear.

Ser Jorah gave her a measuring look. "You think not."

"He could not lead an army even if my lord husband gave him one," Dany said. "He has no coin and the only knight who follows him reviles

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him as less than a snake. The Dothraki make mock of his weakness. He will never take us home."

"Wise child." The knight smiled.

"I am no child," she told him fiercely. Her heels pressed into the sides of her mount, rousing the silver to a gallop. Faster and faster she raced, leaving Jorah and Irri and the others far behind, the warm wind in her hair and the setting sun red on her face. By the time she reached the *khalasar,* it was dusk, and Dany knew what she must do.

The slaves had erected her tent by the shore of a spring-fed pool. She could hear rough voices from the woven grass palace on the hill. Soon there would be laughter, when the men of her *khas* told the story of what had happened in the grasses today. By the time Viserys came limping back among them, every man, woman, and child in the camp would know him for a walker. There were no secrets in the *khalasar.*

Dany gave the silver over to the slaves for grooming and entered her tent. It was cool and dim beneath the silk. As she let the door flap close behind her, Dany saw a finger of dusty red light reach out to touch her dragon's eggs across the tent. For an instant a thousand droplets of scarlet flame swam before her eyes.

The day she had wed Khal Drogo outside the walls of Pentos, the bride gifts had been heaped up about Daenerys in great piles, more gifts than she could possibly imagine, more gifts than she could want or use. The Dothraki had given her slippers and jewels and silver rings for her hair, medallion belts and painted vests and soft furs, sandsilks and jars of scent, needles and feathers and tiny bottles of purple glass, and a gown made from the skin of a thousand mice ("Most lucky," Magister Illyrio told her). Her brother had presented her with her three handmaids, Ser Jorah an old book full of songs and stories from the Seven Kingdoms. The *khal*'s bloodriders offered her the traditional three weapons, whip and *arakh* and bow, and Khal Drogo himself had led forth her filly, grey as the winter sea, with a mane like silver smoke.

Yet it had been Illyrio's gift that made her gasp, the three huge eggs on their bed of velvet. "Dragon's eggs, from the Shadow Lands beyond Asshai," he had told her. "The eons have turned them to stone, yet still they burn bright with beauty."

Stone, she told herself. *They are only stone, even Illyrio said so, the dragons are all dead.* Yet they were the most beautiful things Dany had ever seen, each different from the others, patterned in such rich colors that at first she had thought they were crusted with jewels, and so large it took both of her hands to hold one. The shells were covered with tiny scales that shimmered like polished metal in the light. One egg was a deep green with burnished bronze flecks that seemed to come and go as you turned it. Another was pale cream streaked with gold. The last was black, as black as a midnight sea, yet alive with scarlet ripples and

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swirls. She put her palm against the black egg, fingers spread gently across the curve of the shell. The stone was warm. Almost hot. "The sun," Dany whispered. "The sun warmed them as they rode."

She commanded her handmaids to prepare her a bath. Doreah built a fire outside the tent, while Irri and Jhiqui fetched the big copper tub—another bride gift—from the packhorses, and carried water from the pool. When the bath was steaming, Irri helped her into it, and climbed in after her to scrub her back and wash the dust from her hair. Dany's skin was flushed and pink when she climbed from the tub. Jhiqui laid her down to oil her body and scrape the dirt from her pores, and afterward Irri sprinkled her with spiceflower and cinnamon while Doreah brushed her hair until it shone like spun silver. And all the while, Dany watched the dragon's eggs.

"Fetch the brazier," she said when she was clean and sweet-smelling. "I want a fire."

"*Khaleesi,* it is so hot," Jhiqui said.

"Do as I tell you. The brazier."

When the coals were lit, Dany sent her handmaids away and told them she was not to be disturbed. *This is madness,* she told herself, *it will only crack and burn, and it's so beautiful, Viserys will call me a fool if I ruin it,* and yet, and yet . . .

Gently, she lifted the black-and-scarlet egg from its chest, and carried it with both hands to the fire. She pushed it down amongst the burning coals, and sat crosslegged on her mat to watch. The black scales seemed to glow as they drank in the heat. After a moment's thought, she got the other two eggs, and placed them on the brazier as well.

She watched until the coals had turned to ashes. Drifting sparks floated up and out her smokehole. Heat shimmered in waves around the dragon's eggs. And that was all.

Your brother Rhaegar was the last dragon, Ser Jorah had said. Dany gazed at her eggs sadly. What had she expected? A thousand thousand years ago they had been alive, but now they were only pretty rocks. They could not make a dragon. A dragon was air and fire. Living flesh, not dead stone.

Her supper was a simple meal of fruit and cheese and fry bread, with a jug of honeyed wine to wash it down. "Doreah, stay and eat with me," Dany commanded when she sent her other handmaids away. Jhiqui and Irri were Dothraki girls, of an age with her, taken as slaves when Drogo destroyed their father's *khalasar.* They knew only Dothraki ways. Doreah was older, almost twenty. Magister Illyrio had found her in a pleasure house in Lys. Her hair was the color of honey, and she had eyes like the summer sky.

She lowered those eyes when they were alone. "You honor me, *khaleesi,*" she said, but it was no honor, only service. Long after the moon had risen, they sat together, talking.

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That night, when Khal Drogo came, Dany was waiting for him. He stood in the door of her tent and looked at her with surprise. She rose slowly and opened her sleeping silks and let them fall to the ground. "This night we must go outside, my lord," she told him, for the Dothraki believed that all things of importance in a man's life must be done beneath the open sky.

Khal Drogo followed her out into the moonlight, the bells in his hair tinkling softly. A few yards from her tent was a bed of soft grass, and it was there that Dany drew him down. When he tried to turn her over, she put a hand on his chest. "No," she said. "This night I would look on your face."

There is no privacy in the heart of the *khalasar*. Dany felt the eyes on her as she undressed him, heard the soft voices as she did the things that Doreah had told her to do. It was nothing to her. Was she not *khaleesi*? His were the only eyes that mattered, and when she mounted him she saw something there that she had never seen before. She rode him as fiercely as ever she had ridden her silver, and when the moment of his pleasure came, Khal Drogo called out her name.

They were on the far side of the Dothraki sea when Jhiqui brushed the soft swell of Dany's stomach with her fingers and said, "*Khaleesi*, you are with child."

"I know," Dany told her.

It was her thirteenth name day.

III

The Horse Gate of Vaes Dothrak was made of two gigantic bronze stallions, rearing, their hooves meeting a hundred feet above the roadway to form a pointed arch.

Dany could not have said why the city needed a gate when it had no walls . . . and no *buildings* that she could see. Yet there it stood, immense and beautiful, the great horses framing the jagged purple mountain beyond. The bronze stallions threw long shadows across the waving grasses as Khal Drogo led the *khalasar* under their hooves and down the godsway, his bloodriders beside him.

Dany followed on her silver, escorted by Ser Jorah Mormont and her brother Viserys, mounted once more. After the day in the grass when she had left him to walk back to the *khalasar*, the Dothraki had laughingly called him *Khal Rhae Mhar*, the Sorefoot King. Khal Drogo had offered him a place in a cart the next day, and Viserys had accepted. In his stubborn ignorance, he had not even known he was being mocked; the carts were for eunuchs, cripples, women giving birth, the very young, and the very old. That won him yet another name: *Khal Rhaggat*, the Cart King. Her brother had thought it was the *khal*'s way of apologizing for the

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wrong Dany had done him. She had begged Ser Jorah not to tell him the truth, lest he be shamed. The knight had replied that the king could well do with a bit of shame . . . yet he had done as she bid. It had taken much pleading, and all the pillow tricks Doreah had taught her, before Dany had been able to make Drogo relent and allow Viserys to rejoin them at the head of the column.

"Where is the *city?*" she asked as they passed beneath the bronze arch. There were no buildings to be seen, no people, only the grass and the road, lined with ancient monuments from all the lands the Dothraki had sacked over the centuries.

"Ahead," Ser Jorah answered. "Under the mountain."

Beyond the horse gate, plundered gods and stolen heroes loomed to either side of them. The forgotten deities of dead cities brandished their broken thunderbolts at the sky as Dany rode her silver past their feet. Stone kings looked down on her from their thrones, their faces chipped and stained, even their names lost in the mists of time. Lithe young maidens danced on marble plinths, draped only in flowers, or poured air from shattered jars. Monsters stood in the grass beside the road; black iron dragons with jewels for eyes, roaring griffins, manticores with their barbed tails poised to strike, and other beasts she could not name. Some of the statues were so lovely they took her breath away, others so misshapen and terrible that Dany could scarcely bear to look at them. Those, Ser Jorah said, had likely come from the Shadow Lands beyond Asshai.

"So many," she said as her silver plodded slowly onward, "and from so many lands."

Viserys was less impressed. "The trash of dead cities," he sneered. He was careful to speak in the Common Tongue, which few Dothraki could understand, yet even so Dany found herself glancing back at the men of her *khas,* to make certain he had not been overheard. He went on blithely. "All these savages know how to do is steal the things better men have built . . . and kill." He laughed. "They do know how to kill, for certes. Otherwise I'd have no use for them at all."

"They are my people now," Dany said. "You should not call them savages, brother."

"The dragon speaks as he likes," Viserys said . . . in the Common Tongue. He glanced over his shoulder at Aggo and Rakharo, riding behind them, and favored them with a mocking smile. "See, the savages lack the wit to understand the speech of civilized men." A moss-eaten stone monolith loomed over the road, fifty feet tall. Viserys gazed at it with boredom in his eyes. "How long must we linger amidst these ruins before Drogo gives me my army? I grow tired of waiting."

"The princess must be presented to the *dosh khaleen* . . ."

"The crones, yes," her brother interrupted, "and there's to be some mummer's show of a prophecy for the whelp in her belly, you told me.

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What is that to me? I'm tired of eating horsemeat and I'm sick of the stink of these savages." He sniffed at the wide, floppy sleeve of his tunic, where it was his custom to keep a sachet. It could not have helped much. The tunic was filthy. All the silk and heavy wools that Viserys had worn out of Pentos were stained by hard travel and rotted from sweat.

Ser Jorah Mormont said, "The Western Market will have food more to your taste, Your Grace. The traders from the Free Cities come there to sell their wares. The *khal* will honor his promise in his own time."

"He had better," Viserys said grimly. "I was promised a crown, and I mean to have it. The dragon is not mocked." Spying an obscene likeness of a woman with six breasts and a ferret's head, he rode off to inspect it more closely.

Dany was relieved, yet no less anxious. "I pray that my sun-and-stars will not keep him waiting too long," she told Ser Jorah when her brother was out of earshot.

The knight looked after Viserys doubtfully. "Your brother should have bided his time in Pentos. There is no place for him in a *khalasar*. Illyrio tried to warn him."

"He will go as soon as he has his ten thousand. My lord husband promised a golden crown."

Ser Jorah grunted. "Yes, *khaleesi,* but . . . the Dothraki look on these things differently than we do in the west. I have told him as much, as Illyrio told him, but your brother does not listen. The horselords are no traders. Viserys thinks he sold you, and now he wants his price. Yet Khal Drogo would say he had you as a gift. He will give Viserys a gift in return, yes . . . in his own time. You do not *demand* a gift, not of a *khal*. You do not demand anything of a *khal*."

Cohollo came to Dany as Irri and Jhiqui were helping her down off her silver. He was the oldest of Drogo's three bloodriders, a squat bald man with a crooked nose and a mouth full of broken teeth, shattered by a mace twenty years before when he saved the young *khalakka* from sellswords who hoped to sell him to his father's enemies. His life had been bound to Drogo's the day her lord husband was born.

"*Khaleesi,*" Cohollo said to her, in Dothraki. "Drogo, who is blood of my blood, commands me to tell you that he must ascend the Mother of Mountains this night, to sacrifice to the gods for his safe return."

Only men were allowed to set foot on the Mother, Dany knew. The *khal*'s bloodriders would go with him, and return at dawn. "Tell my sun-and-stars that I dream of him, and wait anxious for his return," she replied, thankful. Dany tired more easily as the child grew within her; in truth, a night of rest would be most welcome. Her pregnancy only seemed to have inflamed Drogo's desire for her, and of late his embraces left her exhausted.

Doreah led her to the hollow hill that had been prepared for her and her *khal*. It was cool and dim within, like a tent made of earth. "Jhiqui, a bath, please," she commanded, to wash the dust of travel from her skin

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and soak her weary bones. It was pleasant to know that they would linger here for a while, that she would not need to climb back on her silver on the morrow.

She was pleased to find the water was scalding hot. "I will give my brother his gifts tonight," she decided, as Jhiqui was washing her hair. "He should look a king in the sacred city. Doreah, run and find him and invite him to sup with me." Viserys was nicer to the Lysene girl than to her Dothraki handmaids, perhaps because Magister Illyrio had let him bed her back in Pentos. "Irri, go to the bazaar, and buy fruit and meat. Anything but horseflesh."

"Horse is best," Irri said. "Horse makes a man strong."

"Viserys hates horsemeat."

"As you say, *khaleesi.*"

She brought back a haunch of goat and a basket of fruits and vegetables. Jhiqui roasted the meat with sweetgrass and firepods, basting it with honey as it cooked, and there were melons and pomegranates and plums and some queer eastern fruit Dany did not know. While her handmaids prepared the meal, Dany laid out the clothing she'd had made to her brother's measure: a tunic and leggings of crisp white linen, leather sandals that laced up to the knee, a bronze medallion belt, a leather vest painted with fire-breathing dragons. The Dothraki would respect him more if he looked less a beggar, she hoped, and perhaps he would forgive her for shaming him that day in the grass. He was still her king, after all, and her brother. They were both blood of the dragon.

She was arranging the last of his gifts—a sandsilk cloak, green as grass, with a pale grey border that would bring out the silver in his hair—when Viserys arrived, dragging Doreah by the arm. Her eye was red where he'd hit her. "How *dare* you send this whore to give me commands," he said. He shoved the handmaid roughly to the carpet.

The anger took Dany utterly by surprise. "I only wanted . . . Doreah, what did you say?"

"*Khaleesi,* pardons, forgive me. I went to him, as you bid, and told him you commanded him to join you for supper."

"No one commands the dragon," Viserys snarled. "*I am your king!* I should have sent you back her head!"

The Lysene girl quailed, but Dany calmed her with a touch. "Don't be afraid, he won't hurt you. Sweet brother, please, forgive her, the girl mispoke herself, I told her to *ask* you to sup with me, if it please Your Grace." She took him by the hand and drew him across the room. "Look. These are for you."

Viserys frowned suspiciously. "What is all this?"

"New raiment. I had it made for you." Dany smiled shyly.

He looked at her and sneered. "Dothraki rags. Do you presume to dress me now?"

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"Please . . . you'll be cooler and more comfortable, and I thought . . . maybe if you dressed like them, the Dothraki . . ." Dany did not know how to say it without waking his dragon.

"Next you'll want to braid my hair."

"I'd never . . ." Why was he always so cruel? She had only wanted to help. "You have no right to a braid, you have won no victories yet."

It was the wrong thing to say. Fury shone from his lilac eyes, yet he dared not strike her, not with her handmaids watching and the warriors of her *khas* outside. Viserys picked up the cloak and sniffed at it. "This stinks of manure. Perhaps I shall use it as a horse blanket."

"I had Doreah sew it specially for you," she told him, wounded. "These are garments fit for a *khal*."

"I am the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, not some grass-stained savage with bells in his hair," Viserys spat back at her. He grabbed her arm. "You forget yourself, slut. Do you think that big belly will protect you if you wake the dragon?"

His fingers dug into her arm painfully and for an instant Dany felt like a child again, quailing in the face of his rage. She reached out with her other hand and grabbed the first thing she touched, the belt she'd hoped to give him, a heavy chain of ornate bronze medallions. She swung it with all her strength.

It caught him full in the face. Viserys let go of her. Blood ran down his cheek where the edge of one of the medallions had sliced it open. "You are the one who forgets himself," Dany said to him. "Didn't you learn *anything*, that day in the grass? Leave me now, before I summon my *khas* to drag you out. And pray that Khal Drogo does not hear of this, or he will cut open your belly and feed you your own intestines."

Viserys scrambled back to his feet. "When I come into my kingdom, you will rue this day, slut." He walked off, holding his torn face, leaving her gifts behind him.

Drops of his blood had spattered the beautiful sandsilk cloak. Dany clutched the soft cloth to her cheek and sat crosslegged on her sleeping mats.

"Your supper is ready, *khaleesi*," Jhiqui announced.

"I'm not hungry," Dany said sadly. She was suddenly very tired. "Share the food among yourselves, and send some to Ser Jorah, if you would." After a moment, she added, "Please, bring me one of the dragon's eggs."

Irri fetched the egg with the deep green shell, bronze flecks shining amidst its scales as she turned it in her small hands. Dany curled up on her side, pulling the sandsilk cloak across her and cradling the egg against her, in the hollow between her swollen belly and small, tender breasts. She liked to hold them. They were so beautiful, and sometimes just being close to them made her feel stronger, braver, as if somehow she was drawing strength from the stone dragons locked within.

She was lying there, holding the egg, when she felt the child move

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within her . . . as if he were reaching out, brother to brother, blood to blood. "*You* are the dragon," Dany whispered to him, "the *true* dragon. I know it. I know it." And she smiled, and went to sleep dreaming of home.

IV

The silk tenting that roofed Khal Drogo's high-timbered hall had been rolled back this night, so her son's naming feast might be celebrated beneath the open sky. The moon had followed Dany and her women back from the house of the *dosh khaleen,* and now it seemed to follow them inside. It was the seventh full moon since Drogo had planted his seed, the night she had looked upon his face, and their child grew heavy inside her.

Dany rode beneath the arched entry and up the center aisle, every eye on her. Flames leapt ten feet in the air from three huge stone-lined firepits. The air was thick with the smells of roasting horsemeat and curdled, fermented mare's milk, the cushions crowded. The sounds of drums and horns swirled up into the night. Half-clothed women spun and danced on the low tables, amid joints of meat and platters piled high with plums and dates and pomegranates. Many of the men were drunk, yet no *arakhs* would clash tonight, not here in the sacred city, where blades and bloodshed were forbidden.

The Dothraki shouted out comments on her belly and her breasts as she passed, hailing the prince within her. She could not understand all they said, but one phrase came clear. "*The stallion that mounts the world,*" they bellowed.

She had heard it first from the oldest crone, a bent and shriveled stick of a woman with a single black eye, the voice of the *dosh khaleen.* "Khalakka dothrae!" she had shrieked, arms raised high. *The prince is riding!* "He shall be the stallion who mounts the world!" And with that she had peered at Dany, her eye dark as polished flint in her wrinkled face. "What shall he be called, the stallion who mounts the world?"

"He shall be called Rhaego," she had answered, as bells rang all around her, a sudden clangor of bronze birds. A deep-throated war horn had sounded its long low note, and a roar had gone up from the Dothraki. "*Rhaego,*" they chanted. "*Rhaego, Rhaego!*"

Khal Drogo was waiting on the high bench, and he nodded as Irri helped her down off her silver. Khal Jommo and Khal Ogo, who had been in Vaes Dothrak with their *khalasar*s when they arrived, had been given seats of high honor to Drogo's right and left. The bloodriders of the three *khal*s sat below them, and further down, Khal Jommo's four wives.

As Doreah and Irri arranged her cushions, Dany searched for her brother. Even across the length of the crowded hall, Viserys should have

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been conspicuous with his pale skin, silvery hair, and beggar's rags, but she did not see him anywhere.

Her glance roamed the crowded tables near the walls, where men whose braids were even shorter than their manhoods sat on frayed rugs and flat cushions around the low tables, but all the faces she saw had black eyes and copper skin. She spied Ser Jorah Mormont near the center of the hall, close to the middle firepit. It was a place of respect, if not high honor; the Dothraki esteemed the knight's prowess with a sword. Dany sent Jhiqui to bring him to her table. Mormont came at once, and went to one knee before her. "*Khaleesi,*" he said, "I am yours to command."

She patted the stuffed horsehide cushion beside her. "Sit and talk with me."

"You honor me." The knight seated himself cross-legged on the cushion. A slave knelt before him, offering a wooden platter full of ripe figs. Ser Jorah took one and bit it in half.

"Where is my brother?" Dany asked. "He ought to have come by now, for the feast."

"I saw His Grace this morning," he told her. "He told me he was going to the Western Market, in search of wine."

"Wine?" Dany said doubtfully. Viserys could not abide the taste of the fermented mare's milk the Dothraki drank, she knew that, and he was oft at the bazaars these days, drinking with the traders who came in the great caravans from east and west. He seemed to find their company more congenial than hers.

"Wine," Ser Jorah confirmed, "and he has some thought to recruit men for his army from the sellswords who guard the caravans." A serving girl laid a blood pie in front of him, and he attacked it with both hands.

"Is that wise?" she asked. "He has no gold to pay soldiers. What if he's betrayed?" Caravan guards were seldom troubled much by thoughts of honor, and the Usurper in King's Landing would pay well for her brother's head. "You ought to have gone with him, to keep him safe. You are his sworn sword."

"We are in Vaes Dothrak," he reminded her. "No one may carry a blade here, or shed a man's blood."

"Yet men die," she said. "Jhogo told me. Some of the traders have eunuchs with them, huge men who strangle thieves with wisps of silk. That way no blood is shed and the gods are not angered."

"Then let us hope your brother will be wise enough not to steal anything." Ser Jorah wiped the grease off his mouth with the back of his hand and leaned close over the table. "He had planned to take your dragon's eggs, until I warned him that I'd cut off his hand if he so much as touched them."

For a moment Dany was so shocked she had no words. "My eggs . . . but they're *mine,* Magister Illyrio gave them to me, a bride gift, why would Viserys want . . . they're only stones . . ."

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"The same could be said of rubies and diamonds and fire opals, princess . . . and dragon's eggs are rarer by far. Those traders he's been drinking with would sell their own manhoods for even one of those *stones,* and with all three Viserys could buy as many sellswords as he might need."

Dany had not known, had not even suspected. "Then . . . he should have them. He does not need to steal them. He had only to ask. He is my brother . . . and my true king."

"He is your brother," Ser Jorah acknowledged.

"You do not understand, ser," she said. "My mother died giving me birth, and my father and my brother Rhaegar even before that. I would never have known so much as their names if Viserys had not been there to tell me. He was the only one left. The only one. He is all I have."

"Once," said Ser Jorah. "No longer, *khaleesi.* You belong to the Dothraki now. In your womb rides the stallion who mounts the world." He held out his cup, and a slave filled it with fermented mare's milk, sour-smelling and thick with clots.

Dany waved her away. Even the smell of it made her feel ill, and she would take no chances of bringing up the horse heart she had forced herself to eat. "What does it mean?" she asked. "What is this stallion? Everyone was shouting it at me, but I don't understand."

"The stallion is the *khal* of *khals* promised in ancient prophecy, child. He will unite the Dothraki into a single *khalasar* and ride to the ends of the earth, or so it was promised. All the people of the world will be his herd."

"Oh," Dany said, in a small voice. Her hand smoothed her gown down over the swell of her stomach. "I named him Rhaego."

"A name to make the Usurper's blood run cold."

Suddenly Doreah was tugging at her elbow. "*My lady,*" the handmaid whispered urgently, "your brother . . ."

Dany looked down the length of the long, roofless hall and there he was, striding toward her. From the lurch in his step, she could tell at once that Viserys had found his wine . . . and something that passed for courage.

He was wearing his scarlet silks, soiled and travel stained. His cloak and gloves were black velvet, faded from the sun. His boots were dry and cracked, his silver-blond hair matted and tangled. A longsword swung from his belt in a leather scabbard. The Dothraki eyed the sword as he passed; Dany heard curses and threats and angry muttering rising all around her, like a tide. The music died away in a nervous stammering of drums.

A sense of dread closed around her heart. "Go to him," she commanded Ser Jorah. "Stop him. Bring him here. Tell him he can have the dragon's eggs, if that is what he wants." The knight rose swiftly to his feet.

"Where is my sister?" Viserys shouted, his voice thick with wine. "I've come for her feast. How dare you presume to eat without me? No one eats before the king. Where is she? The whore can't hide from the dragon."

He stopped beside the largest of the three firepits, peering around at the

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faces of the Dothraki. There were five thousand men in the hall, but only a handful who knew the Common Tongue. Yet even if his words were incomprehensible, you had only to look at him to know that he was drunk.

Ser Jorah went to him swiftly, whispered something in his ear, and took him by the arm, but Viserys wrenched free. "Keep your hands off me! No one touches the dragon without leave."

Dany glanced anxiously up at the high bench. Khal Drogo was saying something to the other *khals* beside him. Khal Jommo grinned, and Khal Ogo began to guffaw loudly.

The sound of laugher made Viserys lift his eyes. "Khal Drogo," he said thickly, his voice almost polite. "I'm here for the feast." He staggered away from Ser Jorah, making to join the three *khals* on the high bench.

Khal Drogo rose, spat out a dozen words in Dothraki, faster than Dany could understand, and pointed. "Khal Drogo says your place is not on the high bench," Ser Jorah translated for her brother. "Khal Drogo says your place is there."

Viserys glanced where the *khal* was pointing. At the back of the long hall, in a corner by the wall, deep in shadow so better men would not need to look on them, sat the lowest of the low; raw unblooded boys, old men with clouded eyes and stiff joints, the dim-witted and the maimed. Far from the meat, and further from honor. "That is no place for a king," her brother declared.

"Is place," Khal Drogo answered, in the Common Tongue that Dany had taught him, "for Sorefoot King." He clapped his hands together. "A cart! Bring cart for *Khal Rhaggat!*"

Five thousand Dothraki began to laugh and shout. Ser Jorah was standing beside Viserys, screaming in his ear, but the roar in the hall was so thunderous that Dany could not hear what he was saying. Her brother shouted back and the two men grappled, until Mormont knocked Viserys bodily to the floor.

Her brother drew his sword.

The bared steel shone a fearful red in the glare from the firepits. "*Keep away from me!*" Viserys hissed. Ser Jorah backed off a step, and her brother climbed unsteadily to his feet. He waved the sword over his head, the borrowed blade that Magister Illyrio had given him to make him seem more kingly. Dothraki were shrieking at him from all sides, screaming vile curses.

Dany gave a wordless cry of terror. She knew what a drawn sword meant here, even if her brother did not.

Her voice made Viserys turn his head, and he saw her for the first time. "There she is," he said, smiling. He stalked toward her, slashing at the air as if to cut a path through a wall of enemies, though no one tried to bar his way.

"The blade . . . you must not," she begged him. "Please, Viserys. It is

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forbidden. Put down the sword and come share my cushions. There's drink, food . . . is it the dragon's eggs you want? You can have them, only throw away the sword."

"Do as she tells you, fool," Ser Jorah shouted, "before you get us all killed."

Viserys laughed. "They can't kill us. They can't shed blood here in the sacred city . . . but I can." He laid the point of his sword between Daenerys' breasts, and slid it downward, over the curve of her belly. "I want what I came for," he told her. "I want the crown he promised me. He bought you, but he never paid for you. Tell him I want what I bargained for, or I'm taking you back. You and the eggs both. He can keep his bloody foal. I'll cut the bastard out and leave it for him." The sword point pushed through her silks and pricked at her navel. Viserys was weeping, she saw; weeping and laughing, both at the same time, this man who had once been her brother.

Distantly, as from far away, Dany heard her handmaid Jhiqui sobbing in fear, pleading that she dared not translate, that the *khal* would bind her and drag her behind his horse all the way up the Mother of Mountains. She put her arm around the girl. "Don't be afraid," she said. "I shall tell him."

She did not know if she had enough words, yet when she was done Khal Drogo spoke a few brusque sentences in Dothraki, and she knew he understood. The sun of her life stepped down from the high bench. "What did he say?" the man who had been her brother asked her, flinching.

It had grown so silent in the hall that she could hear the bells in Khal Drogo's hair, chiming softly with each step he took. His bloodriders followed him, like three copper shadows. Daenerys had gone cold all over. "He says you shall have a splendid golden crown that men shall tremble to behold."

Viserys smiled and lowered his sword. That was the saddest thing, the thing that tore at her afterward . . . the way he smiled. "That was all I wanted," he said. "What was promised."

When the sun of her life reached her, Dany slid an arm around his waist. The *khal* said a word, and his bloodriders leapt forward. Qotho seized the man who had been her brother by the arms. Haggo shattered his wrist with a single, sharp twist of his huge hands. Cohollo pulled the sword from his limp fingers. Even now Viserys did not understand. "No," he shouted, "you cannot touch me, I am the dragon, the *dragon,* and I will be *crowned!*"

Khal Drogo unfastened his belt. The medallions were pure gold, massive and ornate, each one as large as a man's hand. He shouted a command. Cook slaves pulled a heavy iron stew pot from the firepit, dumped the stew onto the ground, and returned the pot to the flames. Drogo tossed in the belt and watched without expression as the medallions

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turned red and began to lose their shape. She could see fires dancing in the onyx of his eyes. A slave handed him a pair of thick horsehair mittens, and he pulled them on, never so much as looking at the man.

Viserys began to scream the high, wordless scream of the coward facing death. He kicked and twisted, whimpered like a dog and wept like a child, but the Dothraki held him tight between them. Ser Jorah had made his way to Dany's side. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Turn away, my princess, I beg you."

"No." She folded her arms across the swell of her belly, protectively.

At the last, Viserys looked at her. "Sister, please . . . Dany, tell them . . . make them . . . sweet sister . . ."

When the gold was half-melted and starting to run, Drogo reached into the flames, snatched out the pot. "Crown!" he roared. "Here. A crown for Cart King!" And upended the pot over the head of the man who had been her brother.

The sound Viserys Targaryen made when that hideous iron helmet covered his face was like nothing human. His feet hammered a frantic beat against the dirt floor, slowed, stopped. Thick globs of molten gold dripped down onto his chest, setting the scarlet silk to smouldering . . . yet no drop of blood was spilled.

He was no dragon, Dany thought, curiously calm. *Fire cannot kill a dragon.*

V

When the battle was done, Dany rode her silver through the fields of the dead. Her handmaids and the men of her *khas* came after, smiling and jesting among themselves.

Dothraki hooves had torn the earth and trampled the stands of beans and rye into the ground, while *arakhs* and arrows had sown a terrible new crop and watered it with blood. Dying horses lifted their heads and screamed at her as she rode past. Wounded men moaned and prayed. *Jaqqa rhan* moved among them, the mercy men with their heavy axes, taking a harvest of heads from the dead and dying alike. After them would scurry a flock of small girls, pulling arrows from the corpses to fill their baskets. Last of all the dogs would come sniffing, lean and hungry, the feral pack that was never far behind the *khalasar.*

The sheep had been dead longest. There seemed to be thousands of them, black with flies, arrow shafts bristling from each carcass. Khal Ogo's riders had done that, Dany knew; no man of Drogo's *khalasar* would be such a fool as to waste his arrows on sheep when there were shepherds yet to kill.

The town was afire, black plumes of smoke roiling and tumbling as they rose into a hard blue sky. Beneath broken walls of dried mud, riders

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galloped back and forth, swinging their long whips as they herded the survivors from the smoking rubble. The women and children of Ogo's *khalasar* seemed to walk with a sullen pride, even in defeat and bondage; they were slaves now, but they seemed not to fear it. It was different with the townfolk. Dany felt pity for them; she remembered what terror felt like. Mothers stumbled along with blank, dead faces, pulling sobbing children by the hands. There were only a few men among them, cripples and cowards and grandfathers.

Ser Jorah said the people of this country named themselves the Lhazareen, but the Dothraki called them *haesh rakhi,* the Lamb Men. Once Dany might have taken them for Dothraki, for they had the same copper skin and almond-shaped eyes. Now they looked alien to her, squat and flat-faced, their black hair cropped unnaturally short. They were herders of sheep and eaters of vegetables, and Khal Drogo said they belonged south of the river bend. The grass of the Dothraki sea was not meant for sheep.

Dany saw one boy bolt and run for the river. A rider cut him off and turned him, and the others boxed him in, cracking their whips in his face, running him this way and that. One galloped behind him, lashing him across the buttocks until his thighs ran red with blood. Another snared his ankle with a lash and sent him sprawling. Finally, when the boy could only crawl, they grew bored with the sport and put an arrow through his eye.

Ser Jorah met her outside the shattered gate. He wore a dark green surcoat over his mail. His gauntlets, greaves, and greathelm were dark grey steel. The Dothraki had mocked him for a coward when he donned his armor, but the knight had spit insults right back in their teeth, tempers had flared, longsword had clashed with *arakh,* and the rider whose taunts had been loudest had been left behind to bleed to death.

Ser Jorah lifted the visor of his flat-topped greathelm as he rode up. "Your lord husband awaits you within the town."

"Drogo took no harm?"

"A few cuts," Ser Jorah answered, "nothing of consequence. He slew two *khals* this day. Khal Ogo first, and then the son, Fogo, who became *khal* when Ogo fell. His bloodriders cut the bells from their hair, and now Khal Drogo's every step rings louder than before."

Ogo and his son had shared the high bench with her lord husband at the naming feast where Viserys had been crowned, but that was in Vaes Dothrak, beneath the Mother of Mountains, where every rider was a brother and all quarrels were put aside. It was different out in the grass. Ogo's *khalasar* had been attacking the town when Khal Drogo caught him. She wondered what the Lamb Men had thought, when they first saw the dust of their horses from atop those cracked-mud walls. Perhaps a few, the younger and more foolish who still believed that the gods heard the prayers of desperate men, took it for deliverance.

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Across the road, a girl no older than Dany was sobbing in a high thin voice as a rider shoved her over a pile of corpses, face down, and thrust himself inside her. Other riders dismounted to take their turns. That was the sort of deliverance the Dothraki brought the Lamb Men.

I am the blood of the dragon, Daenerys Targaryen reminded herself as she turned her face away. She pressed her lips together and hardened her heart and rode on toward the gate.

"Most of Ogo's riders fled," Ser Jorah was saying. "Still, there may be as many as ten thousand captives."

Slaves, Dany thought. Khal Drogo would drive them downriver to one of the towns on Slaver's Bay. She wanted to cry, but she told herself that she must be strong. *This is war, this is what it looks like, this is the price of the Iron Throne. This was what she was bringing home with her.*

Drogo had sworn it to her as they stood beside the Womb of the World, back in Vaes Dothrak. "I will give my son the iron chair his mother's father sat in. I will give him Seven Kingdoms. I, Drogo, *khal,* will do this thing," he had vowed. "I will take my *khalasar* west to where the world ends, and ride the wooden horses across the black salt water as no *khal* has done before. I will kill the men in the iron suits, tear down their stone houses, and bring their broken gods back to Vaes Dothrak. So swears Drogo son of Bharbo, before the Mother of Mountains, as the stars look down in witness." They had left Vaes Dothrak two days later, striking south and west across the plains. Khal Drogo led the *khalasar* on his great red stallion, with Daenerys beside him on her silver. She had carried the child for eight moons now, but Dothraki women rode almost up until the day they gave birth.

"I've told the *khal* he ought to make for Meereen," Ser Jorah said. "He'll get a better price there than he would from a slaving caravan. Illyrio writes that they had a plague last year, and now the brothels are paying double for healthy young girls, and triple for boys under ten. If enough children survive the journey, the gold will buy us all the ships we need, and hire men to sail them."

Behind them, the girl being raped made a heartrending sound, a long sobbing wail that went on and on and on. Dany's hand clenched hard around the reins, and she turned the silver's head. "Make them stop," she commanded Ser Jorah.

"Khaleesi?" The knight sounded perplexed.

"You heard my words," she said. "Stop them." She spoke to her *khas* in the harsh accents of Dothraki. "Jhogo, Quaro, you will aid Ser Jorah. I want no rape."

The warriors exchanged a baffled look.

Jorah Mormont spurred his horse closer. "Princess," he said, "you have a gentle heart, but you do not understand. This is how it has always been. Those men have shed blood for the *khal.* Now they claim their reward."

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Across the road, the girl was still crying, her high singsong tongue strange to Dany's ears. The first man was done with her now, and a second had taken his place.

"She is a lamb girl," Quaro said in Dothraki. "She is nothing, *khaleesi.* The riders do her honor. The Lamb Men lay with sheep, it is known."

"It is known," her handmaid Irri echoed.

"It is known," agreed Jhogo, astride the tall grey stallion that Drogo had given him. "If her wailing offends your ears, *khaleesi,* Jhogo will bring you her tongue." He drew his *arakh.*

"I will not have her harmed," Dany said. "I claim her. Do as I command you, or Khal Drogo will know the reason why."

"*Ai, khaleesi,*" Jhogo replied, kicking his horse. Quaro and the others followed his lead, the bells in their hair chiming.

"Go with them," she commanded Ser Jorah.

"As you command." The knight gave her a curious look. "You are your brother's sister, in truth."

"Viserys?" She did not understand.

"No," he answered. "Rhaegar." He galloped off.

Dany heard Jhogo shout. The rapers laughed at him. One man shouted back. Jhogo's *arakh* flashed, and the man's head went tumbling from his shoulders. Laughter turned to curses as the horsemen reached for weapons, but by then Quaro and Aggo and Rakharo were there. She saw Aggo point across the road to where she sat upon her silver. The riders looked at her with cold black eyes. One spat. The others scattered to their mounts, muttering.

All the while the man atop the lamb girl continued to plunge in and out of her, so intent on his pleasure that he seemed unaware of what was going on around him. Ser Jorah dismounted and wrenched him off with a mailed hand. The Dothraki went sprawling in the mud, bounced up with a knife in hand, and died with Aggo's arrow through his throat. Mormont pulled the girl off the pile of corpses and wrapped her in his blood-spattered cloak. He led her across the road to Dany. "What do you want done with her?"

The girl was trembling, her eyes wide and vague. Her hair was matted with blood. "Doreah, see to her hurts. You do not have a rider's look, perhaps she will not fear you. The rest, with me." She urged the silver through the broken wooden gate.

It was worse inside the town. Many of the houses were afire, and the *jaqqa rhan* had been about their grisly work. Headless corpses filled the narrow, twisty lanes. They passed other women being raped. Each time Dany reined up, sent her *khas* to make an end to it, and claimed the victim as slave. One of them, a thick-bodied, flat-nosed woman of forty years, blessed Dany haltingly in the Common Tongue, but from the others she got only flat black stares. They were suspicious of her, she realized with sadness; afraid that she had saved them for some worse fate.

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"You cannot claim them all, child," Ser Jorah said, the fourth time they stopped, while the warriors of her *khas* herded her new slaves behind her.

"I am *khaleesi,* heir to the Seven Kingdoms, the blood of the dragon," Dany reminded him. "It is not for you to tell me what I cannot do." Across the city, a building collapsed in a great gout of fire and smoke, and she heard distant screams and the wailing of frightened children.

They found Khal Drogo seated before a square windowless temple with thick mud walls and a bulbous dome like some immense brown onion. Beside him was a pile of heads taller than he was. One of the short arrows of the Lamb Men stuck through the meat of his upper arm, and blood covered the left side of his bare chest like a splash of paint. His three bloodriders were with him.

Jhiqui helped Dany dismount; she had grown clumsy as her belly grew larger and heavier. She knelt before the *khal.* "My sun-and-stars is wounded." The *arakh* cut was wide but shallow; his left nipple was gone, and a flap of bloody flesh and skin dangled from his chest like a wet rag.

"Is scratch, moon of life, from *arakh* of one bloodrider to Khal Ogo," Khal Drogo said in the Common Tongue. "I kill him for it, and Ogo too." He turned his head, the bells in his braid ringing softly. "Is Ogo you hear, and Fogo his *khalakka,* who was *khal* when I slew him."

"No man can stand before the sun of my life," Dany said, "the father of the stallion who mounts the world."

A mounted warrior rode up and vaulted from his saddle. He spoke to Haggo, a stream of angry Dothraki too fast for Dany to understand. The huge bloodrider gave her a heavy look before he turned to his *khal.* "This one is Mago, who rides in the *khas* of Ko Jhaqo. He says the *khaleesi* has taken his spoils, a daughter of the lambs who was his to mount."

Khal Drogo's face was still and hard, but his black eyes were curious as they went to Dany. "Tell me the truth of this, moon of my life," he commanded, in Dothraki.

Dany told him what she had done, in his own tongue so the *khal* would understand her better, her words simple and direct.

When she was done, Drogo was frowning. "This is the way of war. These women are our slaves now, to do with as we please."

"It pleases me to hold them safe," Dany said, wondering if she had dared too much. "If your warriors would mount these women, let them take them gently and keep them for wives. Give them places in the *khalasar* and let them bear you sons."

Qotho was ever the cruelest of the bloodriders. It was he who laughed. "Does the horse breed with the sheep?"

Something in his tone reminded her of Viserys. Dany turned on him angrily. "The dragon feeds on horse and sheep alike."

Khal Drogo smiled. "See how fierce she grows!" he said. "It is my son inside her, the stallion who mounts the world, filling her with his fire.

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Ride slowly, Qotho . . . if the mother does not burn you where you sit, the son will trample you into the mud. And you, Mago, hold your tongue and find another lamb to mount. These belong to my *khaleesi.*" He started to reach out a hand to Daenerys, but as he lifted his arm Drogo grimaced in sudden pain, and turned his head.

Dany could almost feel his agony. The wounds were worse than Ser Jorah had led her to believe. "Where are the healers?" she demanded. The *khalasar* had two sorts; barren women and eunuch slaves. The herb-women dealt in potions and spells, the eunuchs in knife, needle, and fire. "Why do they not attend the *khal?*"

"The *khal* sent the hairless men away, *khaleesi,*" old Cohollo assured her. Dany saw the bloodrider had taken a wound himself; a deep gash in his left shoulder.

"Many riders are hurt," Khal Drogo said stubbornly. "Let them be healed first. This arrow is no more than the bite of a fly, this little cut only a new scar to boast of to my son."

Dany could see the muscles in his chest where the skin had been cut away. A trickle of blood ran from the arrow that pierced his arm. "It is not for Khal Drogo to wait," she proclaimed. "Jhogo, seek out these eunuchs and bring them here at once."

"Silver Lady," a woman's voice said behind her, "I can help the Great Rider with his hurts."

Dany turned her head. The speaker was one of the slaves she had claimed, the heavy, flat-nosed woman who had blessed her.

"The *khal* needs no help from women who lie with sheep," barked Qotho. "Aggo, cut out her tongue."

Aggo grabbed her hair and pressed a knife to her throat.

Dany lifted a hand. "No. She is mine. Let her speak."

Aggo looked from her to Qotho. He lowered his knife.

"I meant no wrong, fierce riders." The woman spoke Dothraki well. The robes she wore had once been the lightest and finest of woolens, rich with embroidery, but now they were mud-caked and bloody and ripped. She clutched the torn cloth of her bodice to her heavy breasts. "I have some small skill in the healing arts."

"Who are you?" Dany asked her.

"I am named Mirri Maz Duur. I am godswife of this temple."

"*Maegi,*" grunted Haggo, fingering his *arakh.* His look was dark. Dany remembered the word from a terrifying story that Jhiqui had told her one night by the cookfire. A *maegi* was a woman who lay with demons and practiced the blackest of sorceries, a vile thing, evil and soulless, who came to men in the dark of night and sucked life and strength from their bodies.

"I am a healer," Mirri Maz Duur said.

"A healer of sheeps," sneered Qotho. "Blood of my blood, I say kill this *maegi* and wait for the hairless men."

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Dany ignored the bloodrider's outburst. This old, homely, thick-bodied woman did not look like a *maegi* to her. "Where did you learn your healing, Mirri Maz Duur?"

"My mother was godswife before me, and taught me all the songs and spells most pleasing to the Great Shepherd, and how to make the sacred smokes and ointments from leaf and root and berry. When I was younger and more fair, I went in caravan to Asshai by the Shadow, to learn from their mages. Ships from many lands come to Asshai, so I lingered long to study the healing ways of distant peoples. A moonsinger of the Jogos Nhai gifted me with her birthing songs, a woman of your own riding people taught me the magics of grass and corn and horse, and a maester from the Sunset Lands opened a body for me and showed me all the secrets that hide beneath the skin."

Ser Jorah Mormont spoke up. "A maester?"

"Marwyn, he named himself," the woman replied, in the Common Tongue. "From the sea. Beyond the sea. The Seven Lands, he said. Sunset Lands. Where men are iron and dragons rule. He taught me this speech."

"A maester in Asshai," Ser Jorah mused. "Tell me, godswife, what did this Marwyn wear about his neck?"

"A chain so tight it was like to choke him, Iron Lord, with links of many metals."

The knight looked at Dany. "Only a man trained in the Citadel of Oldtown wears such a chain," he said, "and such men do know much of healing."

"Why should you want to help my *khal*?"

"All men are one flock, or so we are taught," replied Mirri Maz Duur. "The Great Shepherd sent me to earth to heal his lambs, wherever I might find them."

Qotho gave her a stinging slap. "We are no sheep, *maegi*."

"Stop it," Dany said angrily. "She is mine. I will not have her harmed."

Khal Drogo grunted. "The arrow must come out, Qotho."

"Yes, Great Rider," Mirri Maz Duur answered, touching her bruised face. "And your breast must be washed and sewn, lest the wound fester."

"Do it, then," Khal Drogo commanded.

"Great Rider," the woman said, "my tools and potions are inside the god's house, where the healing powers are strongest."

"I will carry you, blood of my blood," Haggo offered.

Khal Drogo waved him away. "I need no man's help," he said, in a voice proud and hard. He stood, unaided, towering over them all. A fresh wave of blood ran down his breast, from where Ogo's *arakh* had cut off his nipple. Dany moved quickly to his side. "I am no man," she whispered, "so you may lean on me." Drogo put a huge hand on her shoulder. She took some of his weight as they walked toward the great mud temple. The three bloodriders followed. Dany commanded Ser Jorah and the warriors

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of her *khas* to guard the entrance, and make certain no one set the building afire while they were still inside.

They passed through a series of anterooms, into the high central chamber under the onion. Faint light shone down through hidden windows above. A few torches burnt smokily from sconces on the walls. Sheepskins were scattered across the mud floor. "There," Mirri Maz Duur said, pointing to the altar, a massive blue-veined stone carved with images of shepherds and their flocks. Khal Drogo lay upon it. The old woman threw a handful of dried leaves onto a brazier, filling the chamber with fragrant smoke. "Best if you wait outside," she told the rest of them.

"We are blood of his blood," Cohollo said. "Here we wait."

Qotho stepped close to Mirri Maz Duur. "Know this, wife of the Lamb God. Harm the *khal* and you suffer the same." He drew his skinning knife and showed her the blade.

"She will do no harm." Dany felt she could trust this old, plain-faced woman with her flat nose; she had saved her from the hard hands of her rapers, after all.

"If you must stay, then help," Mirri told the bloodriders. "The Great Rider is too strong for me. Hold him still while I draw the arrow from his flesh." She let the rags of her gown fall to her waist as she opened a carved chest, and busied herself with bottles and boxes, knives and needles. When she was ready, she broke off the barbed arrowhead and pulled out the shaft, chanting in the singsong tongue of the Lhazareen. She heated a flagon of wine to boiling on the brazier, and poured it over his wounds. Khal Drogo cursed her, but he did not move. She bound the arrow wound with a plaster of wet leaves, and turned to the gash on his breast, smearing it with a pale green paste before she pulled the flap of skin back in place. The *khal* ground his teeth together and swallowed a scream. The godswife took out a silver needle and a bobbin of silk thread and began to close the flesh. When she was done she painted the skin with red ointment, covered it with more leaves, and bound the breast in a ragged piece of lambskin. "You must say the prayers I give you and keep the lambskin in place for ten days and ten nights," she said. "There will be fever, and itching, and a great scar when the healing is done."

Khal Drogo sat, bells ringing. "I sing of my scars, sheep woman." He flexed his arm and scowled.

"Drink neither wine nor the milk of the poppy," she cautioned him. "Pain you will have, but you must keep your body strong to fight the poison spirits."

"I am *khal*," Drogo said. "I spit on pain and drink what I like. Cohollo, bring my vest." The older man hastened off.

"Before," Dany said to the ugly Lhazareen woman, "I heard you speak of birthing songs. . . ."

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"I know every secret of the bloody bed, Silver Lady, nor have I ever lost a babe," Mirri Maz Duur replied.

"My time is near," Dany said. "I would have you attend me when he comes, if you would."

Khal Drogo laughed. "Moon of my life, you do not ask a slave, you tell her. She will do as you command." He jumped down from the altar. "Come, my blood. The stallions call, this place is ashes. It is time to ride."

Haggo followed the *khal* from the temple, but Qotho lingered long enough to favor Mirri Maz Duur with a stare. "Remember, *maegi,* as the *khal* fares, so shall you."

"As you say rider," the woman answered him, gathering up her jars and bottles. "The Great Shepherd guards the flock."

VI

The flies circled Khal Drogo slowly, their wings buzzing, a low thrum at the edge of hearing that filled Dany with dread.

The sun was high and pitiless. Heat shimmered in waves off the stony outcrops of the lows hills around them. As she rode, a thin finger of sweat trickled down slowly between Dany's swollen breasts. The only sounds were the steady clop of their horses' hooves, the rhythmic tinkle of the bells in Drogo's hair, and the distant voices behind them.

Dany watched the flies.

They were as large as bees, gross, purplish, glistening. The Dothraki called them *bloodflies.* They lived in marshes and stagnant pools, sucked blood from man and horse alike, and laid their eggs in the dead and dying. Drogo hated them. Whenever one came near him, his hand would shoot out quick as a striking snake to close around it. She had never seen him miss. He would hold the fly inside his huge fist, long enough to hear its frantic buzzing. Then his fingers would tighten, and when he opened his hand again, the fly would be only a red smear on his palm.

A fly crept across the rump of his stallion, and the horse gave an angry flick of its tail and brushed it away. The others flitted around Drogo, closer and closer. The *khal* did not react. His eyes were fixed on distant brown hills, the reins loose in his hands. Beneath his painted vest, a plaster of fig leaves and caked blue river mud covered the wound on his breast. The herbwomen had made it for him. The poultice Mirri Maz Duur had made had itched and burned, and he had torn it off six days ago, cursing her for a *maegi.* The mud plaster was much more soothing, and the herbwomen made him poppy wine as well. He had been drinking it heavily these past three days, and when it was not poppy wine, it was fermented mare's milk or pepper beer.

Yet he scarcely touched his food, and he thrashed and groaned in the

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night. Dany could see how drawn his face had become. Rhaego was restless in her belly, kicking like a stallion, yet even that did not stir Drogo's interest as it had. Every morning her eyes found fresh lines of pain on his face when he woke from his troubled sleep. And now this silence. It was making her afraid. Since they had mounted up at dawn, he had said not a word. When she spoke, she got no answer but a grunt, and not even that much since midday.

One of the bloodflies landed on the bare skin of the *khal*'s shoulder. Another, circling, touched down on his neck, and crept up toward his mouth. Khal Drogo said nothing, did nothing. His body swayed in the saddle, bells ringing, as his stallion kept onward at a steady walking pace.

Dany pressed her heels into her silver and rode closer. She must do something, she knew. She could not let him go on like this. "My lord," she said softly. "Drogo. My sun-and-stars."

He did not seem to hear. His eyes were open and staring.

The bloodfly crawled up under his drooping mustache and settled on his cheek, in the crease beside his nose. Dany gasped. Terror made her heart beat faster. "*Drogo,*" she cried, loudly. Clumsily, she reached over and touched his arm.

Khal Drogo reeled in the saddle, tilted slowly, and fell heavily from his horse. The flies scattered for a heartbeat, and then circled back to settle on him where he lay.

"No," Dany said, reining up. Heedless of her belly for once, she scrambled off her silver and ran to him.

The grass beneath him was brown and dry. Drogo cried out in pain as Dany knelt beside him. His breath rattled harshly in his throat, and he looked at her without recognition. "My horse," he gasped. Dany brushed the flies off his chest, smashing one as he would have. His skin burned beneath her fingers.

The *khal*'s bloodriders had been following just behind them. She heard Haggo shout, and then they were there. Cohollo vaulted from his horse to land beside her. "Blood of my blood," he said as he dropped to his knees. The other two kept to their mounts.

"No," Khal Drogo groaned, struggling in Dany's arms. "Must ride. Ride. No."

"He fell from his horse," Haggo said, staring down. His broad face was impassive, but his voice was leaden.

"You must not say that," Dany told him. "We have ridden far enough today. We will camp here."

"Here?" Haggo looked around them. The land was brown and sere, inhospitable. "This is no camping ground."

"It is not for a woman to bid us halt," said Qotho, "not even a *khaleesi.*"

"We camp here," Dany repeated. "Haggo, tell them Khal Drogo commanded the halt. If any ask why, say to them that my time is near and I

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could not continue. Cohollo, bring up the slaves, they must put up the *khal*'s tent at once. Qotho—"

"You do not command me, *khaleesi*," Qotho said.

"Find Mirri Maz Duur," she told him. The godswife would be walking among the other Lamb Men, in the long column of slaves. "Bring her to me, with her chest."

Qotho glared down at her, his eyes hard as flint. "The *maegi*." He spat. "This I will not do."

"You will," Dany said, "or when Drogo wakes, he will hear why you defied me."

Furious, Qotho wheeled his stallion around and galloped off in anger . . . but Dany knew he would return with Mirri Maz Duur, however little he might like it. The slaves erected Khal Drogo's tent beneath a jagged outcrop of black rock whose shadow gave some relief from the heat of the afternoon sun. Even so, it was close and warm under the sandsilk as Irri and Doreah helped Dany walk Drogo inside. Thick patterned carpets had been laid down over the ground, and pillows scattered in the corners. Eroeh, the timid girl Dany had rescued outside the mud walls of the Lamb Men, set up a brazier. They laid Drogo down on a woven mat. "No," he muttered, in the Common Tongue. "No, no." It was all he seemed capable of saying.

Doreah unhooked his heavy medallion belt and stripped off his vest and leggings, while Jhiqui knelt by his feet to undo the laces of his riding sandals. Irri wanted to leave the door flaps open to let in the breeze, but Dany forbade it. She would not have them see Drogo this way, in delirium and weakness. When her *khas* came up, she posted them around the tent to stand at guard. "Admit no one without my leave," she told Jhoqo. "No one."

Eroeh stared fearfully at Drogo where he lay. "He dies," she whispered.

Dany slapped her. "The *khal* cannot die. He is the father of the stallion who mounts the world. His hair has never been cut: He still wears the bells his father gave him."

"*Khaleesi*," Jhiqui said, "he fell from his horse."

Trembling, her eyes full of sudden tears, Dany turned away from them. *He fell from his horse!* It was so, she had seen it, and the bloodriders, and no doubt her handmaids and the men of her *khas* as well. And how many more? They could not keep it secret, and Dany knew what that meant. A *khal* who could not ride could not rule, and Drogo had fallen from his horse.

"We must bathe him," she said, stubbornly. She must not allow herself to despair. "Irri, have the tub brought at once. Doreah, Eroeh, find water, cool water, he's so hot." He was a fire in human skin.

The slaves set up the heavy copper tub in the corner of the tent. When Doreah brought the first jar of water, Dany wet a length of silk to lay across Drogo's brow, over the burning skin. His eyes looked at her, but he did not

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see. When his lips opened, no words escaped them, only a moan. "Where is Mirri Maz Duur?" she demanded, her patience rubbed raw with fear.

"Qotho will find her," Irri said.

Her handmaids filled the tub with tepid water that stank of sulfur, sweetening it with jars of bitter oil and handfuls of crushed mint leaves. While the bath was being prepared, Dany knelt awkwardly beside her lord husband, her belly great with their child within. She undid his braid with anxious fingers, as she had the night he'd taken her for the first time, beneath the stars. His bells she laid aside carefully, one by one. He would want them again when he was well, she told herself.

A breath of cool air entered the tent as Aggo poked his head through the silk. "*Khaleesi,*" he said, "the Andal is come, and begs leave to enter."

"The Andal" was what the Dothraki called Ser Jorah. "Yes," she said, rising clumsily, "send him in." She trusted the knight. He would know what to do if anyone did.

Ser Jorah Mormont ducked through the door flap and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimness of the tent. In the fierce heat of the south, he wore loose trousers of mottled sandsilk and open-toed riding sandals that laced up to his knee. His scabbard hung from a twisted horsehair belt. Under a bleached white vest, he was bare-chested, skin reddened by the sun. "Talk goes from mouth to ear, all over the *khalasar,*" he said. "It is said Khal Drogo fell from his horse."

"Help him," Dany pleaded. "For the love you say you bear me, help him now."

The knight knelt beside her. He looked at Drogo long and hard, and then at Dany. "Send your maids away."

Wordlessly, her throat tight with fear, Dany made a gesture. Irri herded the other girls from the tent.

When they were alone, Ser Jorah drew his dagger. Deftly, with a delicacy surprising in such a big man, he began to scrape away the black leaves and dried blue mud from Drogo's chest. The plaster had caked hard as the mud walls of the Lamb Men, but like those walls, it cracked easily. Ser Jorah broke the dry mud with his knife, pried the chunks from the flesh, peeled off the leaves one by one. A foul, sweet smell rose from the wound, so thick it almost choked her. The leaves were crusted with blood and pus, Drogo's breast black and glistening with corruption.

"No," Dany whispered, as tears ran down her cheeks. "No, please, gods hear me, *no.*"

Khal Drogo moaned, and thrashed where he lay, fighting some unseen enemy. Black blood ran slow and thick from his open wound

"Your *khal* is good as dead, princess."

"No, he can't die, he *mustn't,* it was only a cut." Dany took his large, calloused hand in her own small ones, and held it tight between them. "I will not let him die . . ."

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Ser Jorah gave a bitter laugh. "*Khaleesi* or queen, that command is beyond your power. Save your tears, child. Weep for him tomorrow, or a year from now. We do not have time for grief. We must go, and quickly, before he dies."

Dany was lost. "Go? Where should we go?"

"Asshai, I would say. It lies far to the south, at the end of the known world, yet men say it is a great port. We will find a ship to take us back to Pentos. It will be a hard journey, make no mistake. Do you trust your *khas?* Will they come with us?"

"Khal Drogo commanded them to keep me safe," Dany replied uncertainly, "but if he dies . . ." She touched the great swell of her belly. "I don't understand. Why should we flee? I am *khaleesi.* I carry Drogo's heir. He will be *khal* after Drogo . . ."

Ser Jorah frowned. "Princess, hear me. The Dothraki will not follow a suckling babe. Drogo's strength was what they bowed to, and only that. When he is gone, Jhaqo and Pono and the other *kos* will fight for his place, and this *khalasar* will devour itself. The winner will want no more rivals. The boy will be taken from your breast the moment he is born. They will give him to the dogs . . ."

Dany hugged herself. "But *why?*" she cried plaintively. "Why should they kill a little baby?"

"He is Drogo's son, and the crones say he will be the stallion who mounts the world. It was prophesied. Better to kill the child than to risk his fury when he grows to manhood."

The child kicked inside her, as if he had heard. Dany remembered the story Viserys had told her, of what the Usurper's dogs had done to Rhaegar's children. His son had been a babe as well, yet they had ripped him from his mother's breast and dashed his head against a wall. That was the way of men. "They must not hurt my son!" she cried. "I will order my *khas* to keep him safe, and Drogo's bloodriders will—"

Ser Jorah held her by the shoulders. "A bloodrider dies with his *khal.* You know that, child. They will take you to Vaes Dothrak, to the crones, that is the last duty they owe him in life . . . when it is done, they will join Drogo in the night lands."

Dany shivered. She did not want to go back to Vaes Dothrak and live the rest of her life among those terrible old woman, yet she knew that the knight spoke only the truth. Drogo had been more than her sun and stars; he had been the shield that kept her safe. "I will not leave him," she said stubbornly, miserably. She took his hand again. "I will not."

A stirring at the tent flap made Dany turn her head. Mirri Maz Duur entered, bowing low. Days on the march, trailing behind the *khalasar,* had left her limping and haggard, with blistered and bleeding feet and hollows under her eyes. Behind her came Qotho and Haggo, carrying the godswife's chest between them. When the bloodriders caught sight of

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Drogo's wound, the chest slipped from Haggo's fingers and crashed to the floor of the tent, and Qotho swore an oath so foul it seared the air.

Mirri Maz Duur studied Drogo, her face still and dead. "The wound has festered."

"This is your work, *maegi,*" Qotho said. Haggo laid his fist across Mirri's cheek with a meaty *smack* that drove her to the ground. Then he kicked her where she lay.

"*Stop it!*" Dany screamed.

Qotho pulled Haggo away, saying, "Kicks are too merciful for a *maegi.* Take her outside. We will stake her to the earth, to be the mount of every passing man. And when they are done with her, the dogs will use her as well. Weasels will tear out her entrails and carrion crows feast upon her eyes. The flies off the river shall lay their eggs in her womb and drink pus from the ruins of her breasts . . ." He dug iron-hard fingers into the soft, wobbly flesh under the godswife's arm and hauled her to her feet.

"No," Dany said. "I will not have her harmed."

Qotho's lips skinned back from his crooked brown teeth in a terrible mockery of a smile. "No? You say me *no?* Better you should pray that we do not stake you out beside your *maegi.* You did this, as much as the other."

Ser Jorah stepped between them, loosening his longsword in its scabbard. "Rein in your tongue, bloodrider. The princess is still your *khaleesi.*"

"Only while the blood-of-my-blood still lives," Qotho told the knight. "When he dies, she is nothing."

Dany felt a cold fire inside her, burning away her fear. "Before I was *khaleesi,* I was the blood of the dragon. Ser Jorah, summon my *khas.*"

"No," said Qotho. "We will go. For now . . . *khaleesi.*" Haggo followed him from the tent, scowling.

"That one means you no good, princess," Ser Jorah said. "The Dothraki say a man and his bloodriders share one life, and Qotho sees it ending. A dead man is beyond fear."

"No one has died," Dany said. "Ser Jorah, I may have need of your blade. Best go don your armor." She was more frightened than she dared admit, even to herself.

The knight bowed. "As you say." He strode from the tent.

Dany turned back to Mirri Maz Duur. The woman's eyes were wary. "So you have saved me once more."

"And now you must save him," Dany said. "Please . . ."

"You do not ask a slave," Mirri replied sharply, "you tell her." She went to Drogo burning on his mat, and gazed long at his wound. "Ask or tell, it makes no matter. He is beyond a healer's skills." The *khal*'s eyes were closed. She opened one with her fingers. "He has been dulling the hurt with milk of the poppy."

"Yes," Dany admitted.

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"I made him a poultice of firepod and sting-me-not and bound it in a lambskin."

"It burned, he said. He tore it off. The herbwomen made him a new one, wet and soothing."

"It burned, yes. There is great healing magic in fire, even your hairless men know that."

"Make him another poultice," Dany begged. "This time I will make certain he wears it."

"The time for that is past, my lady," Mirri said. "The poison spirits have tasted of his heart. All I can do now is ease the dark road before him, so he might ride painless to the night lands. He will be gone by morning."

Her quiet words were a knife through Dany's breast. What had she ever done to make the gods so cruel? She had finally found a safe place, had finally tasted love and hope. She was finally going home. And now she must lose it all. . . .

"No," she pleaded. "Save him, and I will free you, I swear it. You must know a way . . . some magic, some . . ."

Mirri Maz Duur sat back on her heels and studied Daenerys through eyes as black as night. "There is a spell." Her voice was quiet, scarcely more than a whisper. "But it is hard, lady, and dark. Some would say that death is cleaner. I learned the way in Asshai, and paid dear for the lesson. My teacher was a bloodmage from the Shadow Lands."

Dany went cold all over. "Then you are *truly* a *maegi*. . . ."

"Am I?" Mirri Maz Duur smiled. "Only a *maegi* can save your rider now, Silver Lady."

"Is there no other way?"

"No other."

Khal Drogo gave a shuddering gasp.

"Do it," Dany blurted. She told herself she must not be afraid; she was the blood of the dragon. "Save him."

"There is a price," the godswife said softly.

"You'll have gold, horses, whatever you like."

"It is not a matter of gold or horses. This is bloodmagic, lady. Only death may pay for life."

Dany's breath caught in her throat. "Death?" She wrapped her arms around herself protectively, rocked back and forth on her heels. "My death?" She told herself she would die for him, if she must. She was the blood of the dragon, she would not be afraid. Her brother Rhaegar had died for the woman he loved.

"No," Mirri Maz Duur promised. "Not your death, *khaleesi*."

Dany trembled with relief. "Do it."

The *maegi* nodded solemnly. "As you speak, so it shall be done. Call your servants."

Khal Drogo writhed feebly as Rakharo and Quaro lowered him into the

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bath. "No," he muttered, "no. Must ride." Once in the water, all the strength seemed to leak out of him.

"Bring his horse," Mirri Maz Duur commanded, and so it was done. Jhogo led the great red stallion into the tent. When the animal caught the scent of death, he screamed and reared, rolling his eyes. It took three men to subdue him.

"What do you mean to do?" Dany asked her.

"We need his blood," Mirri answered. "That is the way."

Jhogo edged back, his hand on the hilt of his *arakh.* He was a youth of sixteen years, whip-thin, fearless, quick to laugh, with the faint shadow of his first mustache on his upper lip. He fell to his knees before her. "*Khaleesi,*" he pleaded, "you must not do this thing. Let me kill this *maegi.*"

"Kill her and you kill your *khal,*" Dany said.

"This is bloodmagic," he said. "It is forbidden."

"I am *khaleesi,* and I say it is not forbidden. In Vaes Dothrak, Khal Drogo slew a stallion and I ate his heart, to give our son strength and courage. This is the same. The *same.*"

The stallion kicked and reared and snorted as Rakharo, Quaro, and Aggo pulled him close to the tub where the *khal* floated like one already dead, pus and blood seeping from his wound to stain the bathwaters. Mirri Maz Duur chanted words in a tongue that Dany did not know, and a knife appeared in her hand. Dany never saw where it came from. It looked old; hammered red-bronze, leaf-shaped, its blade covered with ancient glyphs. The *maegi* drew it across the stallion's throat, under the noble head, and the horse kicked and shuddered as the blood poured out of him in a red rush. He would have collapsed, but the men of her *khas* held him up. It took all four. "Strength of the mount, go into the rider," Mirri sang as horse blood swirled into the waters Drogo's bath. "Strength of the beast, go into the man."

Jhogo looked terrified as he struggled with the stallion's weight, afraid to touch the dead flesh, yet afraid to let go as well. Dany was faint with relief. *Only a horse,* she thought. If they could buy Drogo's life with the death of a horse, she would pay the price a thousand times over.

When they let the stallion fall, the bath was a dark red, and nothing showed of Drogo but his face. Mirri Maz Duur had no use for the carcass. "Burn it," Dany told them. It was what they did, she knew. When a man died, his mount was killed as well and placed beneath him on the funeral pyre, to carry him to the night lands. The men of her *khas* dragged the carcass from the tent. The blood had gone everywhere. Even the sandsilk walls were spotted with red, and the rugs underfoot were black and wet.

The braziers were lit. Mirri Maz Duur tossed a pale red powder onto the coals. It gave the smoke a sharp, spicy scent, a pleasant enough smell, yet Eroeh fled sobbing, and Dany was filled with a strange fear. But she had gone too far to turn back now. She sent her other handmaids away.

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"Go with them, Silver Lady," Mirri Maz Duur told her.

"I will stay," Dany said. "The man took me under the stars and gave life to the child inside me. I will not leave him."

"You must. Once I begin to sing, no one must enter this tent. *No one,* do you understand? My song will wake powers older and darker than you know. The dead will dance here this night. No living man must look on them."

Dany bowed her head, helpless. "No one will enter." She bent over the tub, over Drogo in his bath of blood, and kissed him lightly on the brow. "*Bring him back to me,*" she whispered to Mirri Maz Duur before she fled.

Outside the sun was low on the horizon, the sky a bruised red. The *khalasar* had made camp. Tents and sleeping mats were scattered as far as the eye could see. A hot wind blew. Jhogo and Aggo were building a pyre beneath the dead stallion. A crowd had gathered. They stared at Dany with hard black eyes, their faces closed and unsmiling, like masks of beaten copper. She saw Ser Jorah Mormont, wearing mail and leather now, sweat beading on his broad, balding forehead. He pushed his way through the Dothraki to Dany's side. When he saw the scarlet footprints her boots had left on the ground, the color seemed to drain from his face. "What have you done, you little fool?" he asked hoarsely.

"I had to save him."

"We could have fled," he said. "I would have seen you safe to Asshai, princess. There was no need . . ."

"Am I truly your princess?" she asked him.

"You know you are, gods save us both."

"Then help me now."

Ser Jorah grimaced. "Would that I knew how."

Mirri Maz Duur's voice rose to a high, ululating wail that sent a shiver down Dany's back. Some of the Dothraki began to mutter and back away from her. The tent was aglow with the light of braziers within. Through the blood-spattered sandsilk, she glimpsed shadows moving.

Mirri Maz Duur was dancing, and not alone.

Dany saw naked fear on the faces of the Dothraki. "*This must not be,*" Qotho thundered.

She had not seen the bloodrider return. Haggo and Cohollo were with him. They had brought the hairless men, the eunuchs who healed with knife and needle and fire.

"I say this *will* be," Dany replied.

"*Maegi,*" Haggo growled. And old Cohollo—Cohollo who had bound his life to Drogo's on the day of his birth, Cohollo who had always been kind to her—Cohollo looked at her with loathing and spat full in her face.

"You will die, *maegi,*" Qotho promised, "but the other must die first." He drew his *arakh* and made for the tent.

"No," she shouted, "you *musn't.*" She caught him by the shoulder, but Qotho shoved her aside. Dany fell to her knees, crossing her arms over

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her belly to protect the child within. "Stop him," she commanded her *khas*, "kill him."

Rakharo and Quaro stood beside the flap of the tent. Quaro took a single step forward, reaching for the handle of his whip, but Qotho spun graceful as a dancer, the curved *arakh* rising. It caught Quaro low under the arm, the bright sharp steel biting up through leather and skin, through muscle and rib bone. Blood fountained as the young rider reeled backward, gasping. Qotho wrenched the blade free.

"*Horselord,*" Ser Jorah Mormont called. "Try me." His longsword slid from its scabbard.

Qotho charged, cursing. The *arakh* moved so fast that Quaro's blood flew from it in a fine spray, like rain in a hot wind. The longsword caught it a foot from Ser Jorah's face, and held it quivering for an instant as Qotho howled in fury. The knight was clad in chainmail, with gauntlets and greaves of lobstered steel and a heavy gorget around his throat, but he had not thought to don his helm.

Qotho danced backward, *arakh* whirling around his head in a shining blur, flickering out like lightning as the knight came on in a rush. Ser Jorah parried as best he could, but the slashes came so fast that it seemed to Dany that Qotho had four *arakh*s and as many arms. She heard the crunch of sword on mail, saw sparks fly as the long curved blade glanced off a gauntlet. Suddenly it was Mormont stumbling backward, and Qotho leaping to the attack. The left side of the knight's face ran red with blood, and a cut to the hip opened a gash in his mail and left him limping. Qotho screamed taunts at him, calling him a craven, a milk man, a eunuch in an iron suit. "You die now!" he promised, *arakh* shivering through the red twilight. Inside Dany's womb, her son kicked wildly. The curved blade slipped past the straight one and bit deep into the knight's hip where the mail gaped open.

Mormont grunted, stumbled. Dany felt a sharp pain in her belly, a wetness on her thighs. Qotho shrieked triumph, but his *arakh* had found bone, and for half a heartbeat it caught. It was enough. Ser Jorah brought his longsword down with all the strength left him, through flesh and muscle and bone, and Qotho's forearm dangled loose, flopping on a thin cord of skin and sinew. The knight's next cut was at the Dothraki's ear, so savage that Qotho's face seemed almost to explode.

The Dothraki were shouting, Mirri Maz Duur wailing inside the tent like nothing human, Quaro pleading for water as he died. Dany cried out for help, but no one heard. Rakharo was fighting Haggo, *arakh* dancing with *arakh*, until Jhogo's whip cracked, loud as thunder, the lash coiling around Haggo's throat. A yank, and the bloodrider stumbled backward, losing his feet and his sword. Rakharo sprang forward, howling, swinging his *arakh* down with both hands through the top of Haggo's head. The point caught between his eyes, red and quivering. Someone threw a

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stone, and when Dany looked, her shoulder was torn and bloody. "No," she wept, "no, please, stop it, it's too high, the price is too high." More stones came flying. She tried to crawl toward the tent, but Cohollo caught her. Fingers in her hair, he pulled her head back and she felt the cold touch of his knife at her throat. "My baby," she screamed, and perhaps the gods heard her, for as quick as that, Cohollo was dead. Aggo's arrow took him under the arm, to pierce his lungs and heart.

When at last Daenerys found the strength to raise her head, she saw the crowd dispersing, the Dothraki stealing silently back to their tents and sleeping mats. Some were saddling their horses and riding off. The sun had set. Fires burned throughout the *khalasar,* and they seemed to burn hotter and angrier than any fires she had ever known, great orange blazes that crackled with fury and spit embers at the sky.

She tried to rise, and agony seized her and squeezed her like a giant's fist. The breath went out of her; it was all she could do to gasp. The sound of Mirri Maz Duur's voice was like a funeral dirge. Inside the tent shadows whirled.

An arm went under her waist, and then Ser Jorah was lifting her off her feet. His face was sticky with blood, and Dany saw that half his ear was gone. She convulsed in his arms as the pain took her again, and as if from far away she heard the knight shouting for her handmaids to help him. *Are they all so afraid?* she wondered silently, and knew the answer. Another pain took her, and Dany bit back a scream. It felt as if her son had a knife in each hand, as if he were hacking at her to cut his way out.

"Doreah, curse you," Ser Jorah roared. "Come here. Fetch the birthing women."

"They will not come. They say she is accursed."

"They'll come, or I swear I'll have their heads."

Doreah wept. "They are gone, my lord."

"The *maegi,*" someone else said. Was that Aggo? "Take her to the *maegi.*"

No, Dany wanted to say, *no, not that, you mustn't,* but when she opened her mouth, a long wail of pain escaped, and she doubled over in Ser Jorah's arms, the sweat breaking over her skin. *What was wrong with them, couldn't they see?* Inside the tent the shapes were dancing, circling the brazier and the bloody bath, dark against the sandsilk, and some did not look human. She glimpsed the shadow of a great wolf, and another like a man wreathed in flames.

"The Lamb Woman knows the secrets of the birthing bed," Irri said. "She said so, I heard her."

"Yes," Doreah agreed, "I heard her too."

No, she shouted, or perhaps she only thought it, for no whisper of sound escaped her lips. She was being carried. Her eyes opened to gaze up at a flat dead sky, black and bleak and starless. Please, no. The sound

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of Mirri Maz Duur's voice grew louder, until it filled the world. *The shapes!* she screamed. *The dancers!*

Ser Jorah carried her inside the tent.

VII

Wings shadowed her fever dreams.

"*You don't want to wake the dragon, do you?*"

She was walking down a long hall beneath high stone arches. She could not look behind her, *must* not look behind her. There was a door ahead of her, tiny with distance, but even from afar, she saw that it was painted red. She walked faster, and her bare feet left bloody footprints on the stone.

"*You don't want to wake the dragon, do you?*"

She saw sunlight on the Dothraki sea, the living ocean of the plain, rich with the smells of earth and death. Wind stirred the grasses, and they rippled like water. Drogo was there, and he held her in strong arms, and his hand stroked her sex and opened her and woke that sweet wetness that was his alone, and the stars smiled down on them, stars in a daylight sky. "Home," she whispered, as he entered her and filled her with his seed, "home." But suddenly the stars were gone, and across the blue sky swept the great wings, and the world took flame.

"*. . . don't want to wake the dragon, do you?*"

Ser Jorah's face was drawn and sorrowful. "Rhaegar was the last dragon," he told her, his words echoing off the walls of cold stone. One moment he was there and the next he was fading, his flesh pale and colorless, less substantial than the wind. "The last dragon," he whispered, thin as a wisp, and he was gone. She felt darkness behind her, and the red door seemed further away than ever. Dany began to run.

"*. . . don't want to wake the dragon, do you?*"

Viserys stood before her, screaming. "The dragon does not beg, slut. You do not command the dragon. I am the dragon, and I will be crowned." The molten gold trickled down his face like wax, burning deep channels in his flesh. "I am the dragon and I *will be crowned!*" he shieked, and his fingers snapped like snakes, biting at her nipples, pinching, twisting, even as his eyes burst and ran like jelly down seared and blackened cheeks.

"*. . . don't want to wake the dragon . . .*"

The red door was so far ahead of her, and she could feel the icy breath behind, sweeping up on her. If it caught her she would die a death that was more than death, howling forever alone in the darkness. She began to run.

"*. . . don't want to wake the dragon . . .*"

She could feel the heat inside her, a terrible burning in her womb. Her son was standing there, so tall and proud, with Drogo's copper skin and

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her own silver-gold hair, violet eyes shaped like almonds. And he smiled for her and began to lift his hand toward hers, but when he opened his mouth the fire poured out. She saw his heart burning through his chest, and in an instant he was gone, consumed like a moth by a candle, turned to ash. She wept for her child, the promise of a sweet mouth on her breast, but her tears turned to steam as they touched her skin.

"*. . . want to wake the dragon . . .*"

Ghosts lined the hallway, dressed in the faded raiment of kings. In their hands were swords of pale fire. They had hair of silver and hair of gold and hair of platinum white, and their eyes were opal and amethyst, tourmaline and jade. "Faster," they cried, "faster, faster." She raced, and her feet melted the stone wherever they touched. "*Faster!*" the ghosts cried as one, and she screamed and threw herself forward. A great knife of pain ripped down her back, and she felt her skin tear open and smelled the stench of burning blood and saw the shadow of wings. And Daenerys Targaryen flew.

"*. . . wake the dragon . . .*"

The door loomed before her, the red door, so close, so close, the hall was a blur around her, the cold receding behind. And now the stone was gone and she flew across the Dothraki sea, high and higher, the green rippling beneath, and all that lived and breathed fled in terror from the shadow of her wings. She could smell home, she could see it, there, just beyond that door, green fields and great stone houses and arms to keep her warm, *there*. She threw open the door.

"*. . . the dragon . . .*"

And saw her brother Rhaegar, tall and strong, mounted on a stallion as black as his armor. Fire glimmered red through the narrow eyeslit of his helm. "The last dragon," Ser Jorah's voice said faintly. "The last, the last." Dany lifted his polished black visor. The face within was her own.

After that, for a long time, there was only the pain, the fire within her, and the whisperings of stars.

She woke to the taste of ashes. "No," she moaned, "no, please."

"*Khaleesi?*" Jhiqui hovered over her, a frightened doe.

The tent was drenched in shadow, still and close. Flakes of ash drifted upward from a brazier, and Dany followed them with her eyes through the smoke hole above. *Flying,* she thought. *I had wings, I was flying.* But it was only a dream. "Help me," she whispered, struggling to rise. "Bring me . . ." Her voice was raw as a wound, and she could not think what she wanted. Why did she hurt so much? It was as if her body had been torn to pieces and remade from the scraps. "I want . . ."

"Yes, *khaleesi.*" Quick as that Jhiqui was gone, bolting from the tent, shouting. Dany needed . . . something . . . someone . . . what? It was important, she knew. It was the only thing in the world that mattered. She rolled onto her side and got an elbow under her, fighting the blanket tan-

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gled about her legs. It was so hard to move. The world swam dizzily. *I have to . . .*

They found her on the carpet, crawling toward her dragon eggs. Ser Jorah Mormont lifted her in his arms and carried her back to her sleeping silks, while she struggled feebly against him. Over his shoulder she saw her three handmaids, Jhogo with his little wisp of mustache, and the flat broad face of Mirri Maz Duur. "I must," she tried to tell them, "I have to . . ."

". . . sleep, princess." Ser Jorah said.

"No," Dany said. "Please. Please."

"Yes." He covered her with silk, though she was burning. "Sleep and grow strong again, *khaleesi*. Come back to us." And then Mirri Maz Duur was there, the *maegi,* tipping a cup against her lips. She tasted sour milk, and something else, something thick and bitter, and almost gagged. Warm liquid ran down her chin. Somehow she swallowed. The tent grew dimmer, and sleep took her again. This time she did not dream. She floated, serene and at peace, on a black sea that knew no shore.

After a time—a night, a day, a year, she could not say—she woke again. The tent was dark, its silken walls flapping like wings when the wind gusted outside. This time Dany did not attempt to rise. "Irri," she called, "Jhiqui. Doreah." They were there at once. "My throat is dry," she said, "so dry," and they brought her water. It was warm and flat, yet Dany drank it eagerly, and sent Jhiqui for more. Irri dampened a soft cloth and stroked her brow. "I have been sick," Dany said. The Dothraki girl nodded. "How long?" The cloth was soothing, but Irri seemed so sad, it frightened her. "*Long,*" she whispered. When Jhiqui returned with more water, Mirri Maz Duur came with her, eyes heavy from sleep. "Drink," she said, lifting Dany's head to the cup once more, but this time it was only wine. Sweet sweet wine. Dany drank, and lay back, listening to the soft sound of her own breathing. She could feel the heaviness in her limbs, as sleep crept in to fill her up once more. "Bring me . . ." she murmured, her voice slurred and drowsy. "Bring . . . I want to hold . . ."

"Yes?" the *maegi* asked. "What is it you wish, *khaleesi*?"

"Bring me . . . egg . . . dragon's egg . . . please . . ." Her lashes turned to lead, and she was too weary to hold them up.

When she woke the third time, a shaft of golden sunlight was pouring through the smoke hole of the tent, and her arms were wrapped around a dragon's egg. It was the pale one, its scales the color of buttercream, veined with whorls of gold and bronze, and Dany could feel the heat of it. Beneath her bedsilks, a fine sheen of perspiration covered her bare skin. *Dragondew,* she thought. Her fingers trailed lightly across the surface of the shell, tracing the wisps of gold, and deep in the stone she felt something twist and stretch in response. It did not frighten her. All her fear was gone, burned away.

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Dany touched her brow. Under the film of sweat, her skin was cool to the touch, her fever gone. She made herself sit. There was a moment of dizziness, and the deep ache between her thighs. Yet she felt strong. Her maids came running at the sound of her voice. "Water," she told them, "a flagon of water, cold as you can find it. And fruit, I think. Dates."

"As you say, *khaleesi*."

"I want Ser Jorah," she said, standing. Jhiqui brought a sandsilk robe and draped it over her shoulders. "And a warm bath, and Mirri Maz Duur, and . . ." Memory came back to her all at once, and she faltered. "Khal Drogo," she forced herself to say, watching their faces with dread. "Is he—?"

"The *khal* lives," Irri answered quietly . . . yet Dany saw a darkness in her eyes when she said the words, and no sooner had she spoken than she rushed away to fetch water.

She turned to Doreah. "Tell me."

"I . . . I shall bring Ser Jorah," the Lysene girl said, bowing her head and fleeing the tent.

Jhiqui would have run as well, but Dany caught her by the wrist and held her captive. "What is it? I must know. Drogo . . . and my child." Why had she not remembered the child until now? "My son . . . Rhaego . . . where is he? I want him."

Her handmaid lowered her eyes. "The boy . . . he did not live, *khaleesi*." Her voice was a frightened whisper.

Dany released her wrist. *My son is dead,* she thought, as Jhiqui left the tent. She had known somehow. She had known since she woke the first time to Jhiqui's tears. No, she had known *before* she woke. Her dream came back to her, sudden and vivid, and she remembered the tall man with the copper skin and long silver-gold braid, bursting into flame. Small wonder she had not asked for him.

She should weep, she knew, yet her eyes were dry as ash. She had wept in her dream, and the tears had turned to steam on her cheeks. *All the grief has been burned out of me,* she told herself. She felt sad, and yet . . . she could feel Rhaego receding from her, as if he had never been.

Ser Jorah and Mirri Maz Duur entered a few moments later, and found Dany standing over the other dragon's eggs, the two still in their chest. It seemed to her that they felt as hot as the one she had slept with, which was passing strange. "Ser Jorah, come here," she said. She took his hand and placed it on the black egg with the swirls. "What do you feel?"

"Shell, hard as rock." The knight was wary. "Scales."

"Heat?"

"No. Cold stone." He took his hand away. "Princess, are you well? Should you be up, weak as you are?"

"Weak? I am strong, Jorah." To please him, she reclined on a pile of cushions. "Tell me how my child died."

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"He never lived, my princess. The women say . . ." He faltered, and Dany saw how the flesh hung loose on him, and the way he limped when he moved.

"Tell me. Tell me what the women say."

He turned his face away. His eves were haunted. "They say the child was . . ."

She waited, but Ser Jorah could not say it. His face grew dark with shame. He looked half a corpse himself.

"Monstrous," Mirri Maz Duur finished for him. The knight was a powerful man, yet Dany understood in that moment that the *maegi* was stronger, and crueler, and infinitely more dangerous. "Twisted. I drew him forth myself. He was scaled like a lizard, blind, with the stub of a tail and small leather wings like the wings of a bat. When I touched him, the flesh sloughed off the bone, and inside he was full of graveworms and the stink of corruption. He had been dead for years."

Darkness, Dany thought. The terrible darkness sweeping up behind to devour her. If she looked back she was lost. "My son was alive and strong when Ser Jorah carried me into this tent," she said. "I could feel him kicking, fighting to be born."

"That may be as it may be," answered Mirri Maz Duur, "yet the creature that came forth from your womb was as I said. Death was in that tent, *khaleesi.*"

"Only shadows," Ser Jorah husked, but Dany could hear the doubt in his voice. "I saw, *maegi.* I saw you, alone, dancing with the shadows."

"The grave casts long shadows, Iron Lord," Mirri said. "Long and dark, and in the end no light can hold them back."

Ser Jorah had killed her son, Dany knew. He had done what he did for love and loyalty, yet he had carried her into a place no living man should go and fed her baby to the darkness. He knew it too; the grey face, the hollow eyes, the limp. "The shadows have touched you too, Ser Jorah," she told him. The knight made no reply. Dany turned to the godswife. "You warned me that only death could pay for life. I thought you meant the horse."

"No," Mirri Maz Duur said. "That was a lie you told yourself. You knew the price."

Had she? Had she? *If I look back I am lost.* "The price was paid," Dany said. "The horse, my child, Quaro and Qotho, Haggo and Cohollo. The price was paid and paid and paid." She rose from her cushions. "Where is Khal Drogo? Show him to me, godswife, *maegi,* bloodmage, whatever you are. Show me Khal Drogo. Show me what I bought with my son's life."

"As you command, *khaleesi,*" the old woman said. "Come, I will take you to him."

Dany was weaker than she knew. Ser Jorah slipped an arm around her and helped her stand. "Time enough for this later, my princess," he said quietly.

"I would see him now, Ser Jorah."

After the dimness of the tent, the world outside was blinding bright. The sun burned like molten gold, and the land was seared and empty.

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Her handmaids waited with fruit and wine and water, and Jhogo moved close to help Ser Jorah support her. Aggo and Rakharo stood behind. The glare of sun on sand made it hard to see more, until Dany raised her hand to shade her eyes. She saw the ashes of a fire, a few score horses milling listlessly and searching for a bite of grass, a scattering of tents and bedrolls. A small crowd of children had gathered to watch her, and beyond she glimpsed women going about their work, and withered old men staring at the flat blue sky with tired eyes, swatting feebly at bloodflies. A count might show a hundred people, no more. Where the other forty thousand had made their camp, only the wind and dust lived now.

"Drogo's *khalasar* is gone," she said.

"A *khal* who cannot ride is no *khal,*" said Jhogo.

"The Dothraki follow only the strong," Ser Jorah said. "I am sorry, my princess. There was no way to hold them. Ko Pono left first, naming himself Khal Pono, and many followed him. Jhaqo was not long to do the same. The rest slipped away night by night, in large bands and small. There are a dozen new *khalasars* on the Dothraki sea, where once there was only Drogo's."

"The old remain," said Aggo. "The frightened, the weak, the sick."

"And we who swore," Jhogo added. "We remain."

"They took Khal Drogo's herds, *khaleesi,*" Rakharo said. "We were too few to stop them. It is the right of the strong to take from the weak. They took many slaves as well, the *khal*'s and yours, yet they left some few."

"Eroeh?" asked Dany, remembering the frightened child she had saved outside the city of the Lamb Men.

"Mago seized her, who is Khal Jhaqo's bloodrider now," said Jhogo. "He mounted her high and low and gave her to his *khal,* and Jhaqo gave her to his other bloodriders. They were six. When they were done with her, they cut her throat."

"It was her fate, *khaleesi,*" said Aggo.

If I look back I am lost. "It was a cruel fate," Dany said, "yet not so cruel as Mago's will be. I promise you that, by the old gods and the new, by the lamb god and the horse god and every god that lives. I swear it by the Mother of Mountains and the Womb of the World. Before I am done with them, Mago and Ko Jhaqo will plead for the mercy they showed Eroeh."

The Dothraki exchanged uncertain glances. "*Khaleesi,*" the handmaid Irri explained, as if to a child, "Jhaqo is a *khal* now, with twenty thousand riders at his back."

She lifted her head. "And I am Daenerys Stormborn, Daenerys of House Targaryen, of the blood of Aegon the Conquerer and Maegor the Cruel and old Valyria before them. I am the dragon's daughter, and I swear to you, these men will die screaming. Now bring me to Khal Drogo."

He was lying on the bare red earth, staring up at the sun.

A dozen bloodflies had settled on his body, though he did not seem to

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feel them. Dany brushed them away and knelt beside him. His eyes were wide open but did not see, and she knew at once that he was blind. When she whispered his name, he did not seem to hear. The wound on his breast was as healed as it would ever be, the scar that covered it grey and red and hideous.

"Why is he out here alone, in the sun?" she asked them.

"He seems to like the warmth, princess," Ser Jorah said. "His eyes follow the sun, though he does not see it. He can walk after a fashion. He will go where you lead him, but no further. He will eat if you put food in his mouth, drink if you dribble water on his lips."

Dany kissed her sun-and-stars gently on the brow, and stood to face Mirri Maz Duur. "Your spells are costly, *maegi*."

"He lives," said Mirri Maz Duur. "You asked for life. You paid for life."

"This is not life, for one who was as Drogo was. His life was laughter, and meat roasting over a firepit, and a horse between his legs. His life was an *arakh* in his hand and his bells ringing in his hair as he rode to meet an enemy. His life was his bloodriders, and me, and the son I was to give him."

Mirri Maz Duur made no reply.

"When will he be as he was?" Dany demanded.

"When the sun rises in the west and sets in the east," said Mirri Maz Duur. "When the seas go dry and mountains blow in the wind like leaves. When your womb quickens again, and you bear a living child. Then he will return, and not before."

Dany gestured at Ser Jorah and the others. "Leave us. I would speak with this *maegi* alone." Mormont and the Dothraki withdrew. "You *knew*," Dany said when they were gone. She ached, inside and out, but her fury gave her strength. "You knew what I was buying, and you knew the price, and yet you let me pay it."

"It was wrong of them to burn my temple," the heavy, flat-nosed woman said placidly. "That angered the Great Shepherd who herds us all."

"This was no god's work," Dany said coldly. *If I look back I am lost.* "You cheated me. You murdered my child within me."

"The stallion who mounts the world will burn no cities now. His *khalasar* shall trample no nations into dust."

"I spoke for you," she said, anguished. "I saved you."

"*Saved* me?" The Lhazareen woman spat. "Three riders had taken me, not as a man takes a woman but from behind, as a dog takes a bitch. The fourth was in me when you rode past. How then did you save me? I saw my god's house burn, where I had healed good men beyond counting. My home they burned as well, and in the street I saw piles of heads. I saw the head of a baker who made my bread. I saw the head of a boy I had saved from deadeye fever, only three moons past. I heard children crying as the riders drove them off with their whips. Tell me again what you saved."

"Your life."

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Mirri Maz Duur laughed cruelly. "Look to your *khal* and see what life is worth, when all the rest is gone."

Dany could hear no more, not another word. She called out for Ser Jorah and the men of her *khas* and bid them take Mirri Maz Duur and bind her hand and foot and hold her close, but the *maegi* smiled at her as they carried her off, as if they shared a secret. A word, and Dany could have her head off . . . yet then what would she have? A head? If life was worthless, what was death?

They led Khal Drogo back to her tent, and Dany commanded them to fill a tub, and this time there was no blood in the water. She bathed him herself, washing the dirt and the dust from his arms and chest, cleaning his face with a soft cloth, soaping his long black hair and combing the knots and tangles from it till it shone again as she remembered. It was well past dark before she was done, and Dany was exhausted. She stopped for drink and food, but it was all she could do to nibble at a fig and keep down a mouthful of water. Sleep would have been a release, but she had slept enough . . . too long, in truth. She owed this night to Drogo, for all the nights that had been, and yet might be.

The memory of their first ride was with her when she led him out into the darkness, for the Dothraki believed that all things of importance in a man's life must be done beneath the open sky. She told herself that there were powers stronger than hatred, and spells older and truer than any the *maegi* had learned in Asshai. The night was black and moonless, but overhead a million stars burned bright. A comet hung low in the east, its long red banner spread across a third of the sky like a dragon's tail. She took that for an omen.

No soft blanket of grass welcomed them here, only the hard dusty ground, bare and strewn with stones. No trees stirred in the wind, and there was no stream to soothe her fears with the gentle music of water. Dany told herself that the stars would be enough. "Remember, Drogo," she whispered, as she made him comfortable. "Remember our first ride together, the day we wed. Remember the night we made Rhaego, with the *khalasar* all around us and your eyes on my face as you took me. Remember how cool and clean the water was in the Womb of the World. Remember, my sun-and-stars. Remember, and come back to me."

The birth had left her too raw and torn to take him inside of her, as she would have wanted, but Doreah had taught her other ways, and Dany remembered. She used her hands, her mouth, her breasts. She raked him with her nails and covered him with kisses and whispered and prayed and told him stories. She tried once, and twice, and half a hundred times, and by the end she had bathed him with her tears. Yet Drogo did not feel, or speak, or rise.

And when a bleak dawn broke over an empty horizon, Dany knew that he was truly lost to her. "When the sun rises in the west and sets in the

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east," she whispered sadly. "When the seas go dry and mountains blow in the wind like leaves. When my womb quickens again, and I bear a living child. Then you will return, my sun-and-stars, and not before."

Never, the darkness cried, *never never never.*

Inside the tent Dany found a cushion, soft silk stuffed with feathers. She clutched it to her breasts as she walked back out to Drogo, to her sun-and-stars. *If I look back I am lost.* It hurt even to walk, and she wanted to sleep, to sleep and not to dream.

She knelt, kissed Drogo on the lips, and pressed the cushion down across his face.

VIII

The land was red and dead and parched, and good wood was hard to come by. Her foragers returned with gnarled cottonwoods, purple brush, sheaves of brown grass. They took two of the tallest and straightest trees, hacked the limbs and branches from them, skinned off the bark, and split them, laying the logs in a rough square. Its center they filled with straw, brush, bark shavings, and bundles of dry grass. Rakharo chose a stallion from the small herd that remained to them; he was not the equal of Khal Drogo's red, but few horses were. In the center of the square, Aggo fed him a withered apple and dropped him in an instant with an axe blow between the eyes.

Mirri Maz Duur, bound hand and foot, watched from the dust with disquiet in her black eyes. "It is not enough to kill a horse," she told Dany. "By itself, the blood is nothing. You do not have the words to make a spell, nor the wisdom to find them. Do you think bloodmagic is a game for children? You call me *maegi* as if it were a curse, but all it means is *wise.* You are a child, with a child's ignorance. Whatever you mean to do, it will not work. Loose me from these bonds and I will help you."

"I am tired of the *maegi*'s braying," Dany told Jhogo. He took his whip to her, and after that the godswife kept silent.

Over the carcass of the horse, they built a platform of hewn logs; trunks of smaller trees and limbs from the greater, and the thickest straightest branches they could find. They laid the wood east to west, from sunrise to sunset. On the platform they piled Khal Drogo's treasures: his great tent, his painted vests, his saddles and harness, the whip his father had given him when he came to manhood, the *arakh* he had used to slay Khal Ogo and his son, a mighty dragonbone bow. Aggo would have added the weapons Drogo's bloodriders had given Dany for bride gifts as well, but she forbade it. "Those are mine," she told him, "and I mean to keep them." Another layer of brush was piled about the *khal*'s treasures, and bundles of dried grass scattered over them.

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Ser Jorah Mormont drew her aside as the sun was creeping toward its zenith. "Princess . . ." he began.

"Why do you call me that?" Dany challenged him. "My brother Viserys was your king, was he not?"

"He was, my lady."

"Viserys is dead. I am his heir, the last blood of House Targaryen. Whatever was his is mine now."

"My . . . queen," Ser Jorah said, going to one knee. "My sword that was his is yours, Daenerys. And my heart as well. That never belonged to your brother. I am but a knight, and I have nothing to offer you but exile, but I beg you, hear me. Let Khal Drogo go. You shall not be alone. I promise you, no man shall take you to Vaes Dothrak unless you wish to go. You need not join the *dosh khaleen*. Come east with me. Yi Ti, Qarth, the Jade Sea, Asshai by the Shadow. We will see all the wonders yet unseen, and drink what wines the gods see fit to serve us. Please, *khaleesi*. I know what you intend. Do not. *Do not*."

"I must," Dany told him. She touched his face, fondly, sadly. "You do not understand. You *cannot* understand."

"I understand that you loved him," Ser Jorah said, in a voice thick with despair. "I loved my lady wife once, yet I did not die with her. You are my queen, my sword is yours, but do not ask me to stand aside as you climb on Drogo's pyre. I love you too dearly to watch you burn."

"Is that what you fear?" Dany kissed him lightly on his broad forehead. "I am not such a child as that, sweet ser."

"You do not mean to die with him? You swear it, my queen?"

"I swear it," she said, in the Common Tongue of the Seven Kingdoms that by rights were hers.

The third level of the platform was woven of branches no thicker than a finger, and covered with dry leaves and twigs. They laid them north to south, from ice to fire, and piled them high with soft cushions and sleeping silks. The sun had begun to lower toward the west by the time they were done. Dany called the Dothraki around her. Fewer than a hundred were left. How many had Aegon started with, she wondered? It did not matter.

"You will be my *khalasar*," she told them. "I see the faces of slaves. I free you. Go if you wish, no one shall harm you. Stay if you will, as brothers and sisters, husbands and wives." The black eyes watched her, wary, expressionless. "I see the faces of children, women's faces, the wrinkled faces of the aged. I was a child yesterday. Today I am a woman. Tomorrow I will be old. To each of you I say, give me your hands and your hearts, and there will always be a place for you." She turned to the three young warriors of her *khas*. "Jhogo, to you I give the silver-handled whip that was my bride gift, and name you *ko*, and ask your oath, that you will live and die as blood of my blood, riding at my side to keep me safe from harm."

Jhogo took the whip from her hands, but his face was lost and con-

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fused. "*Khaleesi,*" he said hesitantly, "this is not done. It would shame me, to be bloodrider to a woman."

"Aggo," Dany called, paying no heed to Jhogo's words. *If I look back I am lost.* "To you I give the dragonbone bow that was my bride gift." It was double-curved, shiny black and exquisite, taller than she was. "I name you *ko* and ask your oath, that you should live and die as blood of my blood, riding at my side to keep me safe from harm."

Aggo accepted the bow with lowered eyes. "I cannot say these words. Only a man can lead a *khalasar* or name a *ko.*"

"Rakharo," Dany said, turning away from the refusal, "you shall have the great *arakh* that was my bride gift, with hilt and blade chased in gold. And you too I name my *ko,* and ask that you live and die as blood of my blood, riding at my side to keep me safe from harm."

"You are *khaleesi,*" Rakharo said, taking the *arakh.* "I shall ride at your side to Vaes Dothrak beneath the Mother of Mountains, and keep you safe from harm until you take your place with the crones of the *dosh khaleen.* No more can I promise."

She nodded, as calmly as if she had not heard his answer, and turned to the last of her champions. "Ser Jorah Mormont," she said, "first and greatest of my knights, I have no bride gift to give you, but I swear to you, one day you shall have from my hands a longsword like none the world has ever seen, dragon-forged and made of Valyrian steel. And I would ask for your oath as well."

"You have it, my queen," Ser Jorah said, kneeling and laying his sword at her feet. "I vow to serve you, to obey you, to die for you if need be."

"Whatever may come?"

"Whatever may come."

"I shall hold you to that oath. I pray you never regret the giving of it." Dany lifted him to his feet. Stretching on her toes to reach his lips, she kissed the knight gently and said, "You are the first of my Queensguard."

She could feel the eyes of the *khalasar* on her as she entered her tent. The Dothraki were muttering to themselves and giving her strange sideways looks from the corners of their dark almond eyes. They thought her mad, Dany realized. Perhaps she was. She would know soon enough. *If I look back I am lost.*

Her bath was scalding hot when Irri helped her into the tub, but Dany did not flinch or cry aloud. She liked the heat. It made her feel clean. Jhiqui had scented the water with the oils she had found in the market in Vaes Dothrak; the steam rose moist and fragrant. Doreah washed her hair and combed it out, working loose the mats and tangles. Irri scrubbed her back. Dany closed her eyes and let the smell and the warmth enfold her. She could feel the heat soaking through the soreness between her thighs. She shuddered when it entered her, and her pain and stiffness seemed to dissolve. She floated.

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When she was clean, her handmaids helped her from the water. Irri and Jhiqui fanned her dry, while Doreah brushed her hair until it fell like a river of liquid silver down her back. They scented her with spice-flower and cinnamon; a touch on each wrist, behind her ears, on the tips of her milk-heavy breasts. The last dab was for her sex. Irri's finger felt as light and cool as a lover's kiss as it slid softly up between her lips.

Afterward, Dany sent them all away, so she might prepare Khal Drogo for his final ride into the night lands. She washed his body clean, and brushed and oiled his hair, running her fingers through it for the last time, feeling the weight of it, remembering the first time she had touched it, the night of their wedding ride. His hair had never been cut. How many men could die with their hair uncut? She buried her face in it, and inhaled the dark fragrance of the oils. He smelled like grass and warm earth, like smoke and semen and horses. He smelled like Drogo. *Forgive me, sun of my life,* she thought. *Forgive me for all I have done and all I must do. I paid the price, my star, but it was too high, too high. . . .*

Dany braided his hair and slid the silver rings onto his mustache and hung his bells one by one. So many bells, gold and silver and bronze. Bells so his enemies would hear him coming and grow weak with fear. She dressed him in horsehair leggings and high boots, buckling a belt heavy with gold and silver medallions about his waist. Over his scarred chest she slipped a painted vest, old and faded, the one Drogo had loved best. For herself she chose loose sandsilk trousers, slippers that laced halfway up her legs, and a vest like Drogo's.

The sun was going down when she called them back to carry his body to the pyre. The Dothraki watched in silence as Jhogo and Aggo bore him from the tent. Dany walked behind him. They laid him down on his cushions and silks, his head toward the Mother of Mountains far to the northwest.

"Oil," she commanded, and they brought forth the jars, and poured them over the pyre, soaking the silks and the brush and the bundles of dry grass, until the oil trickled from beneath the logs and the air was rich with fragrance.

Dany called for her handmaids. "Bring my eggs," she commanded them. Something in her voice made them run.

"The dragon's eggs?" Ser Jorah took her arm. "My queen, Drogo will have no use for dragon's eggs in the night lands. Better to sell them in Asshai. Sell one and we can buy a ship to take us back to the Free Cities. Sell all three and you will be a wealthy woman all your days."

"They were not given to me to sell," Dany told him.

She climbed the pyre herself to place the dragon's eggs around her sun-and-stars. The black beside his heart, under his arm. The green beside his head, his braid coiled around it. The cream-and-gold down between his legs. When she kissed him for the last time, Dany could taste the sweetness of the oil on his lips.

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As she climbed down off the pyre, she noticed Mirri Maz Duur watching her. "You are mad," the godswife said hoarsely.

"Is it so far from madness to wisdom?" Dany asked. "Ser Jorah, take this *maegi* and bind her to the pyre."

"To the. . . ? My queen, you cannot mean . . ."

"Do as I say." Still he hesitated, until her anger flared. "You swore to obey me, whatever might come. Rakharo, help him."

The godswife did not cry out as they dragged her to Khal Drogo's pyre and staked her down amidst his treasures. Dany poured the oil over the woman's head herself. "I thank you, Mirri Maz Duur," she said, "for the lessons you have taught me."

"You will not hear me scream," Mirri responded, as the oil dripped from her hair and soaked her clothing.

"I will," Dany said, "but it is not your screams I want, only your life. I remember what you told me. Only death can pay for life." Mirri Maz Duur opened her mouth, but made no reply. As she stepped away, Dany saw that the contempt was gone from the *maegi*'s flat black eyes; in its place was something that might have been fear.

Then there was nothing to be done but watch the sun, and look for the first star.

When a horselord dies, his horse is slain with him, so he might ride proud into the night lands. The bodies are burned beneath the open sky, and the *khal* rises on his fiery steed to take his place among the stars. The more fiercely the man burned in life, the brighter his star will shine in the darkness.

Jhogo spied it first. "*There,*" he said in a hushed voice. Dany looked and saw it, low in the east. The first star was her comet, burning red. Blood red; fire red; the dragon's tail. She could not have asked for a stronger sign. She called for the torch. Aggo brought it to her. "*Khaleesi,* are you—"

"Yes." Dany took the torch from his hand, and thrust it down between the logs at the base of the pyre. The oil took the fire at once, the brush and dried grass a heartbeat later. Tiny flames went darting up the fire like swift red mice, skating over the oil and leaping from bark to branch to leaf. A rising heat puffed at her face, soft and sudden as a lover's breath, but in seconds it had grown too hot to bear.

Dany stepped backward. The wood crackled, louder and louder. Mirri Maz Duur began to sing in a shrill, ululating voice. The flames whirled and writhed, racing each other up the platform. The dusk shimmered as the air itself seemed to liquify from the heat. Dany heard wood spit and crack. The fires swept over Mirri Maz Duur. Her song grew louder, shriller . . . then she gasped, again and again, and her song became a shuddering wail, thin and high and full of agony.

And now the flames reached Khal Drogo, and now they were all around him. His clothing took fire, and for an instant he was clad in

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wisps of floating orange silk and tendrils of curling smoke, grey and greasy. Dany's lips parted and she found herself holding her breath. Part of her wanted to go to him as Ser Jorah had feared, to rush into the flames to beg for his forgiveness and take him inside her one last time, the fire melting the flesh from their bones until they were as one, forever.

She could smell the odor of burning flesh, like horseflesh roasting in a firepit. The pyre roared in the deepening dusk like some great beast, drowning out the fainter sound of Mirri Maz Duur's screaming and sending up long tongues of flame to lick at the belly of the night. As the smoke grew thicker, the Dothraki began to back away, coughing and muttering. Huge orange gouts of fire unfurled their banners in the hellish wind, the logs hissing and cracking, glowing cinders rising on the smoke to float away into the dark like so many new-born fireflies. The heat beat at the air with great red wings, driving the Dothraki back, driving off even Mormont, but Dany stood her ground. She was the blood of the dragon, and the fire was in her blood.

She had sensed the truth of it long ago, Dany thought as she took a step closer to the conflagration, but the brazier had not been hot enough. The flames flickered and writhed before her like the women who had danced at her wedding. Whirling and singing and spinning their yellow and orange and crimson veils, fearsome to behold, yet lovely, so lovely, alive with heat. Dany opened her arms to them, her skin flushed and glowing. Mirri Maz Duur had fallen silent. The godswife thought her a child, but children grow, and children learn. *Only death can pay for life.*

Another step, and Dany could feel the heat of the sand on the soles of her feet, even through her sandals. Sweat ran down her thighs and between her breasts and in rivulets over her cheeks, where tears had once run. Ser Jorah was shouting behind her, but he did not matter anymore, only the fire mattered. The flames were so beautiful, the loveliest things she had ever seen, each one a sorcerer robed in yellow and fire and pale blue, swirling their long smokey cloaks. She saw burning lions and great yellow serpents and unicorns made of air and fire, fish and foxes and monsters, each more beautiful than the last. She saw a horse, a great grey stallion made of smoke, its flowing mane a nimbus of blue flame. *Yes, my love, my sun-and-stars, yes, mount now, ride now.*

Her vest had begun to smoulder, so Dany shrugged it off and let it fall to the ground. The painted leather burst into sudden flame as she skipped closer to the fire, her breasts bare to the blaze, streams of milk flowing from her red and swollen nipples. *Now,* she thought, *now,* and for an instant, just an instant, she glimpsed Khal Drogo before her, mounted on his stallion of smoke, a flaming lash in his hand. He smiled at her, and the great whip snaked down at the pyre, hissing.

And from somewhere behind the smoke there came a *crack,* as of shattering stone. The platform of wood and brush and grass began to shift,

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and collapse in upon itself. Bits of burning wood slid down at her, and she was showered with ash and cinders. And something else came crashing down, bouncing and rolling, to land at Dany's feet. It was a chunk of curved rock, pale and veined with gold, broken and smoking. The roaring filled the world, yet dimly through the firefall Dany heard women shriek and children cry out in wonder.

And there came a second *crack,* loud and sharp as thunder, and the smoke stirred and whirled around her and the pyre shifted, the blackened logs exploding as the fire touched their secret hearts. She heard the terrified screams of frightened horses, and the voices of the Dothraki raised in shouts of fear and terror, and Ser Jorah calling her name and cursing. *No,* she wanted to shout to him, *no, my good knight, do not fear for me. The fire is mine. I am Daenerys Stormborn, daughter of dragons, mother of dragons, don't you see? Don't you SEE?*

With a tremendous roar and a belch of flame and smoke that reached thirty feet into the sky, the pyre collapsed and came down around her. Unafraid, Dany strode forward, into the firestorm, calling to her children. The third *crack* was as loud and sharp as the breaking of the world.

When the fire died at last and the ground became cool enough to walk upon, Ser Jorah Mormont found her amidst the ashes, surrounded by blackened logs and bits of glowing ember and the burnt bones of a stallion. She was naked, covered with soot, her clothes turned to ash, her beautiful hair all crisped away . . . yet she was unhurt.

The cream-and-gold dragon was suckling at her left breast, the green-and-bronze at the right. Her arms cradled them close. The black-and-scarlet beast was draped across her shoulders, its long sinuous neck coiled under her chin. When it saw Jorah, it raised its head and looked at him with eyes as red as coals.

Wordless, the knight fell to his knees. The men of her *khas* came up behind him. Jhogo was the first to lay his *arakh* at her feet. "Blood of my blood," he murmured, pushing his face to the smoking earth. "Blood of my blood," she heard Aggo echo. "Blood of my blood," Rakharo shouted.

And after them came her handmaids, and then the others, all the Dothraki, men and women and children, and Dany had only to look at their eyes to know that they were hers now, today and tomorrow and forever, hers as they had never been Drogo's.

As Daenerys Targaryen rose to her feet, her black *hissed,* pale smoke venting from its mouth and nostrils. The other two pulled away from her breasts and added their voices to the call, their wings stirring the air, and for the first time in hundreds of years, the night was alive with the music of dragons. ●

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ON BOOKS

Norman Spinrad

DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

ENDYMION
Dan Simmons
Bantam, $22.95, 480 pp.
SAILING BRIGHT ETERNITY
Gregory Benford
Bantam, $22.95, 416 pp.
VANITAS
S.P. Somtow
Tor, $23.95, 352 pp.
NORTH WIND
Gwyneth Jones
Tor, $23.95, 384 pp.
DEAD BOYS
Richard Calder
St. Martin's Press, $20.95, 199 pp.

Regular readers of this column will be familiar with my generally dubious opinion of the literary wisdom of writing sequels to previously successful novels and particularly when it comes to the sphere of discourse dealt with here, speculative fiction.

Having discussed this issue at exhaustive and exhausting length, suffice it to say for present purposes that I believe the sequel or the extended novel series is antithetical to the core esthetic of speculative fiction, call it what you will—sense of wonder, shock of the new, consciousness-expanding literary experience.

In a word, novelty.

The new.

For surely it is the speculative element: new ideas, new worlds, new science, new technology, new kinds of characters, new style, new form, new consciousness—in the best of all possible science fictional worlds, several or even all of these elements—which makes speculative fiction speculative fiction.

Whereas, just as obviously, it is *familiarity* that defines a sequel or a prequel or the fourth volume in an open-ended novel series. For without at least one familiar element, and more often than not several—a familiar setting or fictional "universe," familiar characters, the continuation of a familiar storyline—a novel simply *can't* be a sequel, a prequel, or part of a series.

"Déjà vu all over again," in the famous words attributed to Yogi Berra, and, as with other such Berraisms—whether actually uttered by Yogi or not—therein lies a deeper truth. For while pur sang science fiction readers may be seekers of the shock of the new or they wouldn't be reading the stuff in the first place, the appeal of the familiar, the esthetic of reassurance, has also been a mainstay of fiction in general, time out of mind.

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That in this commercially sophisticated age it has become the cynical marketing formula for building and holding audiences for episodic television, soap operas, movie series, and their print equivalents should not blind us to the fact that the evocation of the familiar can be a legitimate literary esthetic too.

The epic annals of the tribe, the retelling of archetypal myth, historical fiction, western fiction, and indeed the lion's share of fiction with a contemporary setting, owe a part of their appeal to the summoning up of that cozy feeling of familiarity, that reassurance that you know in what context you are and the rules thereof, if perhaps not what's going on within them.

Somehow, Dorothy, you get the feeling that you *are* in Kansas. Déjà vu, in a sense, the feeling that one way or another, you've been here before. All over again, if, as a reader, this sense of familiarity is what you generally seek.

The exact opposite of the sense of wonder.

But are the pleasurable reassurance of familiarity and the pleasurable shock of the new *inherently antithetical?*

Can these two elements be successfully combined in the same work of fiction?

And if so, how?

For, I would contend, you cannot have a sequel that succeeds as speculative fiction without pulling it off.

And, consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds, let me confess that I too can be a sucker for such stuff that attempts to square the circle.

When, you may ask?

When else?

When I really liked the work to which it is a sequel.

When the writer is someone whose work I can usually not resist picking up anyway.

So herein, not to be one of those little minds hobbled by the hobgoblin of consistency, I'll be considering five sequel novels by five excellent writers whom I've come to admire, dubiously given my admitted theoretical misgivings, but hopefully, given that the identities of the writers are what caused me to read them nevertheless.

First, and I'm afraid far from foremost, is *Endymion* by Dan Simmons, a sequel to *The Fall of Hyperion,* which was a sequel to *Hyperion,* and a prequel, no doubt, to better you don't ask.

Simmons is a masterly writer on a prose and technical level, imaginative, insightful, and, upon occasion, for instance with *Song of Kali, Phases of Gravity,* and except for the ending, *Carrion Comfort,* a gifted story-teller too.

Unfortunately, the book that made his major reputation was *Hyperion,* a long, complicated, well-written, imaginatively thought-out, post-modern cyberspace opera, which, after over four hundred pages, ended abruptly in mid-air.

What can I say—as a cynical commercial strategy, it worked on many people, yours truly included. After investing so much reading time in

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such an interesting and well-written novel that left all of its characterological and thematic threads hanging, how could I *not* pick up the sequel, *The Fall of Hyperion,* even though I all but threw *Hyperion* across the room at the end?

Whether I would've shelled out twenty bucks for the experience is another matter, but as a reviewer, I *do* get this stuff free.

Well, after a very slow series of opening chapters advancing the story at a snail's pace while reprising the vastly complicated back story of *Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion did* more or less come to a satisfying closure.

And later on I learned that *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* had originally been delivered as one huge novel, exigencies of production and pricing having forced the publisher to have Simmons cut it in half and rewrite the beginning of what became *The Fall of Hyperion* to bridge the gap.

So okay, in this instance, one could say that the writer was more to be pitied than censured, and Dan Simmons is a writer I admire. So, after staring at 468 pages of *Endymion* for several weeks, with an ambiguous mixture of anticipation and trepidation, I took the plunge.

If *Hyperion* left me wanting to throw the book across the room, *Endymion* had me wishing for a rail gun in order to propel it out of time and space down the nearest available black hole.

The novel begins promisingly enough, with the title character narrating the tale retrospectively as he awaits execution in a so-called Schrödinger's cat box, a sealed orbital capsule which will release cyanide gas sooner or later triggered by random particle decay.

And the story related is the tale of his journey down the Tethys in the company of the android A. Bettik and the girl Aenea, pursued by Father Captain De Soya and his crew. The Tethys is a kind of transplanetary river, segments of it on many worlds, connected by farcaster portals, teleportation gates now in ruins after the disappearance of the Technocore, the Artificial Intelligences supposedly vanquished in *The Fall of Hyperion.* Aenea is the girl who entered a time portal at the end of *The Fall of Hyperion* and came out here in book three, destined, we are told, to become the messiah who will somehow liberate the worlds of men from the tyranny of the latter-day Roman Catholic Church, which has dispatched De Soya to stop her.

So far, so good. Neat, in fact.

Aenea is seeking out the unknown Architect of the portals and her future destiny, Endymion is her guardian knight, A. Bettik is his Sancho Panza, and De Soya is Nemesis.

So Simmons is able to keep most of the vastly complicated back story off-stage, filtering through only what he needs to tell a classic tale of vision quest and pursuit through world after world toward apotheosis at the end of the line.

On a sentence-by-sentence and paragraph-by-paragraph level, Dan Simmons is a fine writer. On

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an imaginative level, he is quite good at creating a plethora of colorful worlds through which to run his chase, and on a technical level, he cannot be faulted for his rendering of all the derring-do.

Well, on a fictional fantasy level, at least.

Maybe having Endymion swimming around in waters beneath a glacier in his skivvies for around half a hour when in fact he would succumb to hypothermia in a few minutes *is* a bit over the top. Maybe some of the twentieth-century locutions, such as the "Schrödinger's cat box," itself, *are* a bit sloppy, not to say cutesy-poo. Maybe there *is* too much reliance on coincidence.

Maybe all these action-loops get us nowhere storywise but a little further down the river.

But on the other hand, much of the above could be said of many such quest tales from Homer's *Odyssey* onward. And the varied exotic backgrounds are colorful, and the action loops well-paced to maintain tension on an internal level. And Simmons *has* done a good job of setting us up for the climactic moment wherein the action climax, the end of the journey, and the revelatory thematic conclusion will come together in a synergetic apotheosis.

Right. . . ?

Wrong.

Very, very wrong.

After 468 pages, *Endymion* ends in mid-air with virtually nothing resolved or revealed except the denouement of the action plot and not even all of that!

Revealing itself as nothing but a set of action-loops strung together between the end of *The Fall of Hyperion* and the next slice of what I fear is going to be more of the same.

It pains me to say it, but *Endymion* is a cheat.

It cheats the reader, who, for $22.95, gets a book that goes nowhere, a collection of action loops that while well-written not only do not amount to anything like a real story, but whose technical and linguistic faux pas and improbabilities reveal themselves in retrospect as a slapdash lack of seriousness on the part of the writer.

Worse still, it also cheats both reader and writer of the same thing; the Dan Simmons of *Song of Kali* and *Phases of Gravity* and *Carrion Comfort* and what along such a creative evolutionary vector should lie beyond.

Criticism should not become a mind-reading act, but it strains credulity well past the breaking point to suppose that the skilled literary artist and sophisticated consciousness revealed in *those* novels and in any number of fine shorter works could have produced something like *Endymion* in all innocence of what he was and was not doing.

Even if a subsequent volume reveals *Endymion* to be yet another first half of a long novel sliced in half by Schlockam's Razor, there is no excuse here. Structured as it is as a series of action loops, a hundred and more pages could easily enough have been boiled out of it

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without detriment to the story, such as it isn't.

Dan Simmons would seem to have learned the commercial lesson of *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* all too well. On that level, *Endymion* and however many more sequels to come will no doubt make perfect sense.

But on a creative level, in terms of its effect on the development of one of the most promising talents to enter the field in a decade and more, *Endymion* the product achieves what *Endymion* the novel does not even attempt.

It attains the level of genuine tragedy.

Gregory Benford's *Sailing Bright Eternity* is something else again, definitely the final novel of Benford's so-called "Galactic Center" series.

Definitely the capper because Benford and the publisher both wisely so declare, for the novel itself reaches a closure beyond which further sequels would seem to be rendered impossible, or at least cosmically anti-climactic.

So-called "Galactic Center" series because this series, as defined by the publisher and perhaps by the author, has a rather peculiar history.

The true story of the Galactic Center series, literarily speaking, and it would seem as Benford originally intended, begins with *Great Sky River,* and runs through *Tides of Light* and *Furious Gulf* into this concluding volume, *Sailing Bright Eternity.*

These four novels are the epic two-generation tale of the journey of Killeen, his son Toby, their tribe, the Bishops, and their alien allies, as they flee the destruction of their homeworld by the advanced mech civilization, toward the center—toward the physical center of the galaxy, toward the center of the advanced mech civilization, toward the center of Benford's vision, toward, if you will, the void which is the center of the Great Wheel of Being.

This much of the tale is a true epic; a single story that hangs together through four novels, two lead characters who are father and son, a tribal journey and vision quest that stands admirably for the existential position of organic intelligence in a galaxy dominated by machine intelligences whom the laws of physics themselves would seem to have rendered hopelessly superior to mere flesh.

Then too, Benford has been pursuing his other career as a cosmological astrophysicist, a field of knowledge that has not exactly stood still during the years it took him to write these novels. Nor has Benford's reputation therein, especially concerning speculation as to the nature of things at galactic cores. So there is the added interest of observing the evolution of his views of such scientific matters, plus a narrative tension propelling the whole series derived from the anticipation of what such a scientist-novelist will reveal as the central nature of the galaxy when his epic heroes finally get there.

Through the first two novels, Benford handles the inherent contradiction between laying in the

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background of what has gone before for those who have not read it while not stupefying those who have as well as anyone can, using, among other such devices, "Aspects," half-alive recordings of the dead implanted in the living, to get in what is necessary, and admirably managing to avoid rehashing what is not.

Further, the story of the evolution and later devolution of the relationship between Killeen and Toby—an excellent meditation upon growing up, fatherhood, and for want of a better word, sonhood—forms the human-scale core along which the cosmic epic emotionally coheres.

Which is to say that *Great Sky River* and its sequel *Tides of Light* do as good a job of bridging the gaps between sense of wonder and familiarity, series continuity and closure of the individual novels therein, the cosmic and the human perspectives, hard scientific speculation and visionary transcendence, as the various theoretical contradictions are likely to allow anyone to do.

However. . . .

When the third novel, *Furious Gulf,* appeared, it was touted by the publisher as the *fifth* novel of what was then called the "Galactic Center series" for the first time. Two of Benford's previous novels, *In the Ocean of Night* and *Across the Sea of Suns*, were revealed as books one and two.

Okay, both of these earlier novels deal with the same theme, the confrontation of our organic form of life with superior machine intelligences. And since they, like *Great Sky River* and *Tides of Light,* play by the current best scientific knowledge of the laws of mass, time, and energy, they *can* be said to be set in the same "universe," namely *ours.*

True too, alas, that these days about the only way to get backlist books back into print is to retrospectively invent a series for them to be a part of, and *In the Ocean of Night* and *Across the Sea of Suns* are good novels unworthy of oblivion. So what the hell, as a marketing ploy, why not. . . ?

Unfortunately, Benford, it would seem, was not content to leave it at that. *In the Ocean of Night* and *Across the Sea of Suns* are indeed connected by a single central character, not Killeen or Toby, but astronaut Nigel Walmsley, and they take place long eons before the era of *Great Sky River.*

And instead of letting a marketing ploy stay a marketing ploy, Benford, perhaps for the best of idealistic reasons, would appear to have decided to retroactively validate it on a literary level by manifesting Walmsley something like 35,000 years later at the core of the galaxy near the end of *Furious Gulf.*

This, as one might imagine, involved no little contortion of the laws of time and space in the service of literary necessity on the part of a writer who had previously played rigorously within them.

No big deal ordinarily. Science fiction writers do it successfully all the time and I can hardly plead in-

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nocent myself. But herein, at least for my money, it tended to weaken the total esthetic structure by vitiating the rigorous scientific realism that was one of the central pleasures of the previous two books.

And, it would seem, having decided to breach it for the story purpose of dragging Walmsley up the timelines and his novels into the series, Benford went further and constructed an environment at the galactic center wherein almost anything could happen that Benford wanted to happen for fictional purposes.

Benford *does* provide a sort of scientific rationale for this silly-putty space-time construct at the galactic core. He *is* a major scientific expert on such matters and I am not, and maybe it *does* parse mathematically. But *fictionally* speaking, this transmutation into scientifically justified surrealism two and a half novels into a series promising something quite else at the end of the epic journey just doesn't parse *literarily* for me.

Walmsley is only encountered by Toby toward the end of *Furious Gulf,* so the focus on the father and son protagonists that has admirably carried the (real) series thus far is maintained. But in *Sailing Bright Eternity,* this retroactive inclusion of the two Walmsley novels in the series creates structural and story problems.

Benford's mission in *Sailing Bright Eternity* is to bring this whole mighty epic to a thematic, speculative, plotwise, visionary, and in the terms he has set for himself even transcendent, apotheosis.

No mean task, and hardly made any easier by the necessity of laying in three long novels' worth of background and back story!

The last thing that Benford needed to inflict on himself was to tack the back story of two *more* novels onto the front end of the series to account for, plus the consequent need to bring the story of Nigel Walmsley to a thematic and characterological closure too.

But that is what he did.

The whole literary logic of what has gone before would have the characterological closure of this epic be the transformational conclusion of the tale of Killeen and Toby, the characters upon whom we have been focused throughout.

Instead, the narrative focus is split between Toby and Walmsley as they meet and diverge and converge again on their long magical mystery tours through the warped space time of the "esty." On a structural and story level, this split weakens this concluding novel considerably.

As a literary tour-de-force, it works rather better. Benford is a writer of considerable stylistic range and sophistication, and he applies all of it here, using memory, time-warping devices, actualized surrealism, and so forth, to reprise, reconfigure, and illuminate all that has gone before in both the Walmsley and Killeen-Toby tracks of the back story, bringing the series to a closure that, while it may disappoint on a speculative scientific level and break the previous classical epic

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dramatic structure, is not thematically unsatisfying, at least for me.

I say "at least for me" because I *have* read all the preceding novels in the series—three by my count, five by the publisher's—so I quite literally cannot imagine what a reader who came to it cold would make of *Sailing Bright Eternity*. Depending for its effect as it largely does on evoking and transmogrifying all that has gone before in the service of reaching its thematically resonant visionary conclusion, I would suspect not very much of it would seem coherent.

The evocation of familiarity versus the sense of wonder—write a sequel or a capstone of a series for the virgin audience or for those who have read the previous novels? Not even a writer of Gregory Benford's skills would seem to be capable of resolving the contradiction, of squaring this literary circle.

Nor, would it seem, can a critic. If you've read what's gone before, you can't approach the next volume as an innocent. If you're an innocent, you can't imagine what might be experienced by those who have read what has gone before.

Except. . . .

Vanitas, by S.P. Somtow, would appear to be the capstone volume of a series too, in this case a trilogy about Timmy Valentine, two-thousand-year-old pubescent vampire rock star. Having read the first book, *Vampire Junction,* but not the second, *Valentine,* gives me a rather strange binocular perspective on the third.

In *Vampire Junction,* we meet Timmy Valentine, made a vampire in his pubescent youth centuries ago, and now, in the present, a fave rave rock star. By the time we come to *Vanitas,* Timmy, though still a rock star, has slid past his peak, and has somehow become a mortal human, having exchanged his vampiric immortality with Angel Todd, the dopplegänger who apparently played the role of Timmy in the film version of his life, shot, apparently, during the novel I haven't read, *Valentine.*

Or something like that.

I say "something like that" because I haven't read *Valentine,* read *Vampire Junction* quite a while ago, and have deliberately not referred back to either book at all, because, after all, a reader who picks up *Vanitas* cold probably won't bother to do so either.

Binocular vision. I remember *some* of this back story, but not all of it. So while I may not come to *Vanitas* as a total naïf, I can at least in part share the perspective of the reader who comes to it as a free-standing novel.

Which is to say dependent upon the author and not my own memory to fill in the back story of at least half of what has gone before.

Why did I read the first book in the series, *Vampire Junction,* in the first place?

Well, for one thing, it wasn't billed as the opening act of a trilogy, and probably not conceived as such, since Somtow didn't write it that way, as witness the satisfying closure. And for another, S.P. Somtow, who has also published under

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the true form of his name, Somtow Sutcharitcul, is a fascinating writer.

Not enough that he is a scion of Thai nobility who grew up all over the world, he is a well-regarded avant garde progressive oriental classical composer. Nevertheless, he has lived in Los Angeles for a long time and is almost too-thoroughly tuned in to American popular culture.

What is truly amazing is that he *writes* like all of the above, with control of a range of styles, considerable psychological insight, one of the weirdest imaginations on the planet, a humorous sense of the bizarre, and a bizarre sense of humor.

Which was why I couldn't resist a vampire rock and roll novel by S.P. Somtow. Nor was I disappointed in *Vampire Junction*. Not only did Somtow deliver what the premise and the identity of the author might lead one to expect, but there was the added attraction that part of the book was set in an exotic and tacky and entirely believable modern Bangkok. It's hard to imagine there's another writer around who could give you pop-cult Los Angeles and pop-cult Bangkok on the same realistic yet gently sardonic reality level.

For whatever reason, *Valentine* escaped my attention, but *Vanitas* delivers much of what *Vampire Junction* did, only more so. Once more the bulk of the action is split between Los Angeles and Bangkok, once more Somtow demonstrates his oneness with both the Southern Californian and contemporary Thai zeitgeists. Once more, we follow Timmy Valentine and his roadies on a tour toward apocalypse.

But in the interim, Somtow has matured as a writer. The humor is still there, much of it Grand Guignol, but now some of it darkens in the direction of tragic irony. There is perverse sex here, not just for shock value, but as a meditation upon perversity. The angst of the characters is psychologically realer. The treatment of the supernatural elements has an edge of mystical seriousness. Somtow's facile and flexible prose has become somehow a keener instrument, capable now not only of a large range of effects, but of depths to match.

Then too, Somtow has enlarged the sphere of discourse in space and in time. Timmy Valentine is sent on a long swan-song grand tour by his record company that will climax with the capper in Bangkok, and along the way Somtow gives us contemporary Europe, glimpses of the world of music, and, via flashbacks to Timmy's wanderings as the eternal kid through time from the Roman Empire to the present, colorful swatches of history, as Timmy meets and one way or another inspires such personages as Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Dracula.

Somtow the wise-guy is still here—as witness the subtitle of the novel, "Escape from Vampire Junction"—but *Vanitas* is the work of a potentially truly major writer right on the brink of his full maturity.

But the ending, at least for a reader such as myself without

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sharp detailed memories of *Vampire Junction* and no memories of *Valentine* at all, just doesn't work.

Or anyway not entirely.

It *does* work on a structural and plot level. Timmy Valentine and his alter-ego Angel Todd *do* confront each other and their destinies at the climactic concert in Bangkok, the other main character and story threads *do* converge nicely therein, and the operatic Götterdämmerung is worthy of Wagner. Not for nothing, literarily speaking, is Somtow also a composer; he knows from fugal structure and operatic climaxes.

The problem is that he was faced with much the same task on a somewhat less cosmic scale that Benford faced in concluding his Galactic Center series in *Sailing Bright Eternity*: how to bring a novel series to a dramatic, thematic, characterological, and structural closure.

And he opted for much the same solution, only more so, namely a surreal magical mystery tour through the memory palace of what has gone before to give that final chord its resonance.

So unless these memories *do* resonate with meaning for the reader or are made to, this textbook example of how to do it structurally just doesn't make it on a psychological level.

Perhaps if one has read *Vampire Junction* and *Valentine* recently, one's memories thereof will be sharp enough to render the intended emotional pathos and its transcendence spiritually meaningful.

But if, like me, you've read *Vampire Junction* when it came out several years ago and *Valentine* not at all, or worse still have never read either, the structurally sound apotheosis of *Vanitas* comes off as surrealistic sturm und drang rather too dependent on literary special effects to satisfy.

When you come right down to it, the evocation of memories of what has gone before *must* be the key element upon which a sequel, other things being equal, succeeds or fails. The difficulty, perhaps the nearly unresolvable paradox, is to decide *whose* memories.

Benford, in *Sailing Bright Eternity*, and Somtow, in *Vanitas*, more or less chose to rely on the memories of what has gone before evoked in the minds of readers who *had* read their earlier work to give their grand apotheoses the desired multiplex resonance, or anyway that is the way the execution of these works turned out. Which, of course, tends to leave readers *without* those memories, readers coming to the final volume as a free-standing novel, less than satisfied, if not somewhat lost in space.

Simmons, on the other hand, in *The Fall of Hyperion*, opted for bringing the new readers of the series up to speed, resulting in a slow and leaden opening for those who *had* acquired the memories of having read *Hyperion*.

Is this an inherently unresolvable paradox? Is squaring this circle impossible?

Well, maybe.

Is there even a strategy for trying?

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Well, yes, curiously enough the same one essayed by Gwyneth Jones in *North Wind* and Richard Calder in *Dead Boys,* and not without considerable success.

North Wind is a sequel to Jones's *White Queen,* an excellent tale of psychologically strange and extremely well-rendered aliens, the so-called "Aleutians," at large on twenty-first century Earth, somewhat in the manner of self-styled First World sophisticates establishing themselves on a Third World planet.

Dead Boys is a kind of sequel to *Dead Girls,* a sometimes realistic and sometimes surrealistic novel in which human females are transformed by a kind of nanotech virus at puberty or thereabouts into "Dolls," the Dead Girls of the title, sexual predators of a kind, a synthetic species destined perhaps to replace humanity with themselves.

While *White Queen* and *Dead Girls* were two drastically different sorts of books in terms of style, setting, theme, even level of reality, there was one strong parallel: both were centered—*Dead Girls* perhaps to a greater degree than *White Queen*—on transpecies sexual obsessions.

In *White Queen,* Clavel, one of the Aleutians, conceives an obsession with the human Johnny Guglioli, which results in a transpecies rape that later partially motivates Johnny and his human lover Braemar to attempt to destroy the alien colony ship in orbit.

Dead Girls is largely the story of the thanatotic affair between the human Ignatz and the Dead Girl, Primavera.

In *North Wind,* the story of Clavel, Johnny, and Braemar has become the stuff of Aleutian legend, and the main characters are the Aleutian, Bella and the human, Sidney Carton (reference intended!), both alienated from their own societies, who act out a love story of a kind.

The future Earth of *North Wind* is rather different from that of *White Queen,* being the evolutionary (or devolutionary) product of the events thereof; human culture has been changed by its confrontation with the aliens, the aliens have been changed by their confrontation with humanity, and the relationship between the Clavel-Johnny and the Bella-Sidney stories does not even become really relevant till well past the middle of the book.

But while one need not have read *White Queen* to enjoy or comprehend *North Wind,* the central story of the first book *does* provide resonance to the thematic denouement of the second.

The Aleutians are a strange race of aliens indeed, individual beings who also share a kind of eternal species hive mind which stores not only memories but the recycling personalities of the individuals themselves, so that for them, reincarnation is literally quite real.

Then too, the Aleutians have their recorded popular entertainment, of which the story of Clavel and Johnny has become a template staple in the manner of Romeo and

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Juliet or Beauty and the Beast in ours.

And without giving away too much, the true identity of Bella, a kind of pseudo-telepathically crippled alien changeling, is the linchpin of the story, a story that resonates to the Clavel-and-Johnny myth much as endless human soap opera resonates to Romeo-and-Juliet.

For what Jones has done is taken the entire story of *White Queen* and transformed it into an alien pop cult legend decades on in *North Wind*. This cunning strategy allows her to slowly introduce in the beginning just what will be needed much later on. It is done unobtrusively enough to give those who have *not* read *White Queen* what they need without leaving those who *have* twiddling their thumbs while they are being brought up to speed.

In other words, Jones herein, by transforming and paring down the events of *White Queen* into popular alien iconography, a collective cultural memory, gives the new reader a kind of *synthetic memory* of having read that book, at least for the necessary literary purposes of *North Wind*, at the same time evoking the *real memories* of those who have in more or less the same mythologized form. It's a neat tight-rope act, maybe it isn't quite perfect, but Jones does manage to pull it off. The key to her success is that she doesn't rely at any point on anything she hasn't implanted in the mind of the new reader first, while keeping such stuff to the bare minimum in order to avoid giving the readers of the first book the déjà vu all over again feeling of having to sit through a plot summary thereof.

In *Dead Boys*, Richard Calder does something at once rather similar and strikingly different.

Dead Girls began rather realistically, segueing deeper and deeper into the imagistic logic of surrealism as it proceeded toward a denouement in which Primavera died, and one was not always sure what was actually occurring in phenomenological terms much of the time, especially toward the end.

Dead Boys, the sequel, begins with a fairly long series of surrealistic stream of consciousness sequences inside the head of one of the "Dead Boys" of the title under the influence of a psychoactive substance and fragmented memories, and it takes quite a while to get a notion of *who* this even is, let alone what is really going on.

It finally more or less develops—one can never be quite sure what is real or not in this book—that the male protagonist is the Ignatz of the first book addicted to "allure" (a kind of drug produced by the Dead Girls) who keeps the dead Primavera's "womb" in a jar of sorts to turn out same to feed his jones.

Well, sort of. He's also Dagon, an "Elohim," a kind of male cognate of the Dolls, which has evolved between the two books.

As near as one can make out, and it takes at least half the novel for it to sort of coalesce, Dolls and Elohim form a new species, or per-

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haps two new species existing in a kind of dark symbiosis.

The Dolls reproduce by sexually infecting male humans—the Doll-loving Dead Boys addicted to their "allure"—with their nanotech, who in turn transmit the nanotech to human females, turning them into Dolls.

The evolutionary logic of this would have the Dolls sooner or later wipe out the human species necessary to their own reproduction; once human females have all become Dolls, no more human males to transmit their nanotech, no more human females to turn into themselves.

So somehow the Elohim have come into being to keep down the Doll population and prevent this from happening, a new male species sexually fixated on getting off by executing Dolls in a variety of loathsome ritual manners.

If all this sounds confusing, well, it is. This is a future, or a nested matrioschka-doll series of futures, in which the nature of reality itself has not only mutated, but keeps on mutating, the whole seen through a series of surrealistic distorting lenses.

Warning!

Scenes and images here may be highly offensive to almost anyone, and if they're not, don't call me, and I won't call you.

Violent libidinally driven murder, execution, and torture are central to *Dead Boys*. Masochistic collaboration of the victims in same as well. There is a lot of evilly perverse sex here, at times gorily rendered.

Which is not necessarily to say that *Dead Boys* is an evilly perverse book.

What Calder has written is a passionate, angry, savage meditation on sexual fantasies, gender roles, power relationships, sadomasochism, and, arguably, the inherent eternal war between the sexes, which takes place on a metaphysical, psychological, and imagistic level, not on the level of anything we would recognize as realistic mimesis.

This is not a book for everyone. This may not even be a book for everyone who appreciated *Dead Girls*. If you like William Burroughs you will probably like *Dead Boys*. Indeed, not only are there thematic and imagistic similarities to Burroughs, there are stylistic similarities too.

And for purposes of the present discussion, it is interesting to see that Calder does something here that Burroughs himself does well when he is on, but fails to do when he is not.

Books like Burroughs's *The Ticket that Exploded,* which maintains surreality throughout that is made even less comprehensible by his use of random cut-up technique, never really transcend the wall of babble.

But works like *Naked Lunch* and *Nova Express,* in which sharply rendered scenes emerge from time to time from the imagistic fog, resonate in the zeitgeist and the reader's mind as modern literary masterpieces.

Dead Girls proceeded from rela-

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tively realistic mimesis toward great and greater surreality, so that the denouement worked or did not work almost entirely on an imagistic level.

Dead Boys moves in the opposite direction, beginning in surreal confusion, layering on more and more of the same, until long about the middle of the book, I at least was beginning to despair of any coherent meaning.

But then, past the midpoint, an overall picture of what is occurring on a mimetic story level *does* begin to cohere, who and what the characters are slowly begins to come into more focus, every strange thing seems to stepwise collapse onto the thematic attractor, so that the denouement, in a structural inversion of *Dead Girls,* takes place on what is not all *that* far from a conventional coherent science fictional level.

Thus, in a way, Calder has done here what Jones did in *North Wind,* only more so.

In *Dead Boys,* the events and personages of *Dead Girls* have not merely been transformed into a legend out of the sequel's past, but have been fragmented into disjointed shards of memory in the consciousness of the protagonist through whom the readers—those who have read the first book and those who have not—perceive them.

Further, the protagonist himself has mutated to the point where his identity is not even clear to himself till well into the novel. Further still, reality itself has mutated, and continues mutating.

The recognition of familiarity and the shock of the new.

Can these two elements be successfully combined in the same work of fiction?

Writing a sequel that works as well for the virgin audience as for those who have read the previous novels.

Is this an inherently unresolvable paradox?

Maybe not always.

Not if both sets of readers enter the sequel in the same state of mental confusion as *the viewpoint character himself.* Not if that viewpoint character commences the tale as someone other than his incarnation in the first book and only, very slowly, never quite completely, in bits and pieces and fragments of dreams and trips and hallucinations, recovers his memories of what has gone before at the same pace as the readers.

Then, perhaps, as with *Dead Boys,* it not only doesn't matter whether you've read *Dead Girls* or not, it doesn't matter whether the first book ever even existed, whether the fragmented surreal memories of the events thereof come from actually having read it, or from the stream of slowly cohering consciousness of the protagonist of the sequel.

It's not perfect.

It's certainly not a technique that can be used very often.

But it's hard to imagine a means of squaring this literary circle that can come closer than this. ●

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NEXT ISSUE

AUGUST COVER STORY

Multiple Hugo- and Nebula-Award-winner **Ursula K. Le Guin**, one of the best known and most universally respected SF writers in the world today, returns to these pages next month with a vivid and evocative new novelette, "Mountain Ways." In this one, Le Guin returns again to the star-spanning, Hainish-settled, interstellar community known as the Ekumen, the same fictional universe as her famous novels *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed,* zeroing-in this time on the distant planet of O—which may have the most intricate and bizarre marriage customs in the universe—for a typically compelling and hard-hitting examination of the question: What do you do when your only chance of happiness violates everything you've ever believed in, and in order to take that chance, you'd have to do something that all your values and all your training tells you is unforgiveably wrong? Don't miss this one, as it's certain to be one of the major stories of the year!

TOP-FLIGHT PROFESSIONALS

Nebula- and World Fantasy-Award-winner **Gene Wolfe**, another of the true giants of the field, makes one of his too-infrequent appearances in these pages with a sly, cunning, and surprising analysis of the difficulties and unexpected dangers of "Counting Cats in Zanzibar"; **Tony Daniel** returns with perhaps his most exciting and Cutting Edge work to date, a big, powerful, and powerfully strange new novella that takes us from the woods of the Pacific Northwest to the center of the Earth itself as it unfolds the bizarre and fascinating saga of "The Twilight Companion"; Nebula- and Hugo-winner **Terry Bisson**, one of our most popular authors, returns with another wild, wooly, and very funny adventure of Wilson Wu (featured in 1994's "The Hole in the Hole"), as the gonzo super-genius tackles another outré scientific mystery, this one with implications that stretch all the way to "The Edge of the Universe"; and new writer **David Hast**, making a wry *Asimov's* debut, sweeps us along with a group of very odd tourists who are about to experience "Earth: Your Toxic Dream Vacation."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column serves up a tasty helping of "Gourmet To Go"; plus **Peter Heck** with "On Books," and an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our August issue on sale on your newsstand on June 18, 1996, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of our upcoming issues!

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Memorial Day's the climax of the Spring con(vention) season. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

MAY 1996

23-27—**CostumeCon.** For info, write: **Box 1095, Renton WA 98057.** Or phone: **(206) 241-2000** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Seattle Washington (if city omitted, same as in address) at the SeaTac Marriott. *Guests will include: none announced. For SF, fantasy and historical costuming.*

23-27—**Int'l. Space Development Conference. (212) 726-8000.** Grand Hyatt, New York NY. Zubrin, Landis, Bisson.

23-26—**ConQuest. (913) 649-8733.** Park Place, Kansas City MO. Alan Steele, Lubov, L. Killough, Myrna Logan.

24-26—**Russian National SF Convention. (3432) 60-82-73.** Ekaterinburg Russia.

24-27—**DisClave. (606) 225-1522. (AOL) disclave95.** Near Washington DC. One thousand fans expected.

24-27—**WisCon. (608) 233-8550.** Concourse Hotel, Madison WI. Le Guin, Charnas, Bujold, Vinge. Feminism & SF.

24-27—**MediaWestCon. (517) 372-0738.** Lansing MI. About media SF and fantasy, and related fanzines.

24-27—**InConsequential.** Scotch Corner Hotel, Darlington England. About humor in fantasy and SF.

25-26—**SciFi Dreamin'.** Lycoming College, Williamsport PA. Michael (Commander Sinclair) O'Hare (Babylon 5).

30-June 2—**Project A-Kon. (214) 278-6850.** Harvey Hotel Addison, Dallas TX. Ben Dunn. Japanese animation.

31-June 2—**Duckon.** Hyatt, Lisle IL. Dermot Dobson, Doug Rice, Bill Roper. No more info on this at press.

31-June 2—**ThunderCon. (405) 692-7035.** *Medallion Hotel, Oklahoma City OK. A Star Trek convention.*

31-June 3—**New Zealand National Con. (03) 389-4224.** City Travelodge, Christchurch, New Zealand. Moorcock.

JUNE 1996

1-2—**ColoniaCon. (+49 0221) 9212-1514 or 258-3561. (FidoNet) 2:2453/400.4.** Cologne Germany.

2-July 13—**Clarion Writers' Workshop.** Michigan State U., E. Lansing MI. M. McHugh, J. P. Kelly, Kessel.

7-9—**Ad Astra, Box 7276 Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. (416) 454-5499.** Holiday Inn, Yorkdale ON. David Hartwell.

7-16—**SCACon, Box 4321, Blaine WA 98231. (206) 833-4141.** Vancouver WA. Medieval group's 30th anniversary.

20-23—**SF Research Ass'n., M.M. Levy, UW-Stout, Menominee WI 54751. (502) 937-1691.** U. of WI, Eau Claire WI.

13-16—**Magnum Opus Con, Box 6585, Athens GA 30604. (706) 549-1533.** Radisson, Atlanta GA. A multi-media con.

14-16—**Ozmopolitan, Wizard of Oz Club, Box 95, Kinderhook IL 62345.** For fans of the L. Frank Baum books.

15-17—**American Booksellers, 383 Main Ave., Norwalk CT 06851. (203) 840-5614.** McCormick Place, Chicago IL.

16-July 26—**Clarion West Writers' Workshop, 340 15th Ave. E. #350, Seattle WA 98112. (206) 322-9083.** T. Bisson.

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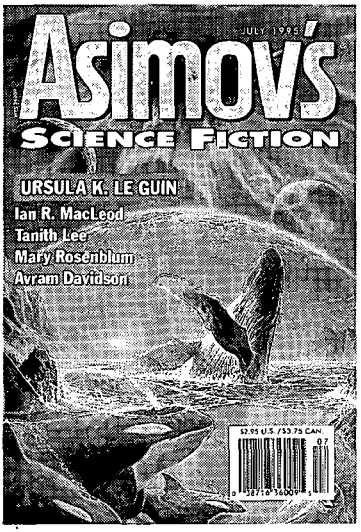

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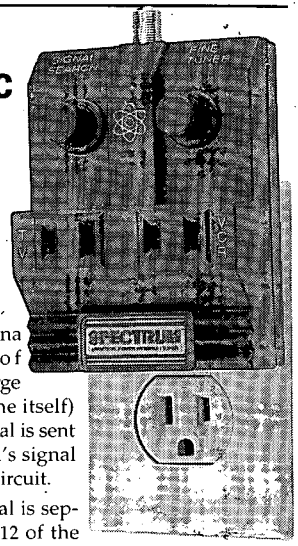

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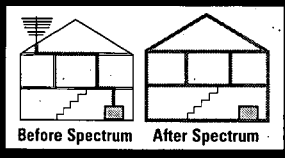

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